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44 Western

MAGAZINE

OCT.



**A HUNDRED WAGONS,
ROLLING TO HELL!**

by **TOM ROAN**

**GUN-BROTHERS OF THE
BRIMSTONE BORDER**

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ALL STORIES NEW

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Vol. 15

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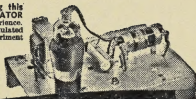
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NEXT ISSUE OUT SEPTEMBER 20th!

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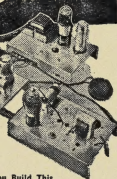
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★ .44 TALK ★

EVERY once in a while, we get a letter from a reader or contributor which points up some salty incident, a strikingly colorful and interesting sidelight that helps to typify the dramatic pattern of the frontier. From the days of the buckskin mountain men up to the twilight of the open range, the hearty, full-blooded laughter of the Westerners often played as important a part in everyday frontier life as did the crash of six-shooters, and the dust, the shouts and bawling of calves at round-up time.

Here, Dave Sands, of West Virginia, comes up with this amusing little story of Dodge City in the old days, and we are happy to pass it on to our readers:

Editor, .44 Western
Sir:

If there was anything the wild and woolly West loved, next to a good rousing fight, either with fist or guns, it was a good, practical joke. Such a joke was the one Mysterious Dave Mathers, gunman, killer and all around badman, played on the Reverend Johnson, an Evangelist preacher who had come to Dodge City to hold a series of revival meetings.

A hell-and-brimstone type of exhorter, the Reverend Johnson was assisted in his sermons by four deacons, and because he could make a magnetic appeal and wring tears from even the most hardened men, large gatherings turned out each night to hear his sermons. Some of the worst sinners in town attended but they came only to jeer and scoff. Of these hecklers, Mysterious Dave Mathers was undoubtedly the worst.

Each night that Mathers attended the meetings, then Johnson made it a habit to single him out and preach directly to him. After several nights his magnetic words seemed to take an interest in the sermons. Mathers, for he stopped his jeering and seemed to take an interest in the sermons.

One night, after a long and heart-appealing sermon, Mathers buried his face in his hands and wept like a child. As a spectator put it, "He was so whipped that his ears flopped."

The Reverend Johnson, vastly encouraged by this, let his fervor get the best of him. He declared that he would be willing to die if he could save this one vile sinner from hell. The four deacons also expressed their

willingness to die and go straight to heaven, if they could save Mathers from the devil.

At this expression of faith in him, Mathers rose to his feet and said tragically, "I got your company, friends. Now that we're all saved, we'll all go to heaven together. First off the preacher, then the deacons, and then me!"

Whipping out his sixgun from his holster Mathers began to shoot. The Reverend Johnson dived through a window behind him, taking most of it with him. The four deacons also hunted cover in a hurry. None, it seemed was in too big a hurry, after all, to go to heaven. After that, they left Mathers alone, and didn't worry any more about saving his soul.

It is, perhaps, safe to say that while the Reverend Johnson and the good deacons beat an understandably hasty retreat, they did, however, return. Schools, churches, and civic welfare organizations eventually found their place in what were once the tough, violent end-of-steel towns and roaring boom camps.

It is the constant aim of *.44 Western* to bring you the colorful drama of the Western saga in all its infinite variety. Although such incidents as we have printed above might lack the epic sweep and the gripping tension of the range wars, we still believe that our readers wish to know as much of the whole story of the frontier as is possible, at this later day, for us to present.

Each month, in these pages, we shall continue to print stories and brief dramatic factual pieces which bring back to life the whole vigorous picture of the Old West's glory days.

The next issue, featuring stories by men who knew and love the West, will be published on September 20th.

THE EDITOR.

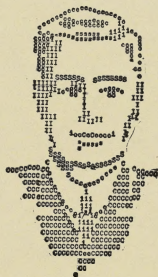
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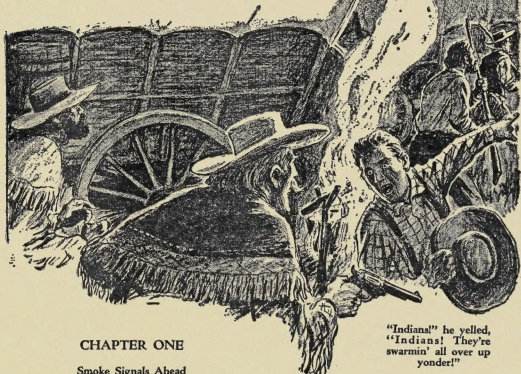
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A Hundred Wagons, Rolling to Hell!

By Tom Roan



CHAPTER ONE

Smoke Signals Ahead

"Indians!" he yelled,
"Indians! They're
swarmin' all over up
yonder!"

HE SAT on the tongue of a huge Conestoga, looking northward, with the wide brim of a white hat tilted over the left side of his face to shield his eyes from the lowering sun. With his elaborately beaded and fringed black buckskins, and his yellow hair hanging almost to his shoulders, Captain Long Bill Yancey was a striking-looking frontiersman. He showed no interest whatsoever in the quick, light footsteps coming up behind him from the opposite side of the wagon train that circled around the big, gushing spring on

the high flat. He had a great many pressing problems to absorb him.

Long Bill Yancey's pale gray eyes were on the country ahead. It was a land that appeared to roll gradually upward, waves of ridges and little valleys succeeding each other until they dimmed into the horizon. These were the Rockies, the Great Barrier through which the wagon train would have to crawl—a place of great hardships and danger.

"You are Captain Yancey?"

"They call me that." He did not stir so



Ahead, Bill Yancey, wagon scout, saw the flame and smoke of the embattled wagon train. Behind him, a courageous Conestoga girl was putting up her own hopeless battle against a band of death-dealing savages. But the grim, uncompromising code of the frontier decreed that Bill's caravan must push onward for the good of the many!

much as an eyebrow to turn toward the feminine voice behind him. Many women had been running to him with their complaints in the past four days of waiting on the flat. He was tired of their bickering and quarreling.

"I am Miss Wheeler!" Impatience was creeping into the voice behind him now. "I have come to make a request."

"Well?"

"Well?" He heard a foot stamp angrily. "Is this the way to talk to a lady—with your back to her?" Her angry words failed to move Yancey an inch.

It was hard for him to keep a straight face, for the desire to laugh swept over him

all at once. "She might walk around the end of the tongue and come face to face with him," he drawled. "Out here, or, rather, up yonder," he lifted a long, fringed arm to point to northward, "people get shot for walking up too close behind a man before making themselves known. But," he rose and turned to face her, "what can I do for you, Miss—er—Miss—"

"Wheeler."

"Oh, yes, Wheeler."

He swallowed something in his throat, and then slowly removed his big hat, his eyes scrutinizing her from head to heel. She returned the stare. "What—can I do for you?"

She made no immediate answer, but stared back at him. She was an exceptionally tall girl, with the fairest face, the blackest eyes and hair he had ever seen. Unlike frontier women, she had soft, white hands that had never held a fighting weapon. Perhaps she had seen very few men carrying weapons, and he was certainly a walking arsenal. A six-shooter swayed at either hip, a long knife swung on his stomach from a silver chain around his neck. Beside the knife was a tiny poison tube, the kind men often wore on the frontier to insure quick death when torture or slow starvation threatened.

"I—I am Angelina Wheeler," the girl said suddenly. "I am the Reverend Walter Wheeler's daughter. I came to ask you delay for—for another day or two—"

"Oh, I see!" he cut in, a pinch of crispness in his tone. "Your father was to see me only a few hours ago, Miss Wheeler. You want me to keep the rest of the people waiting here on the flat until Mr. Clinton Keever's six wagons come to join us. I'm sorry," he turned away from her and looked at the distant hills, "we have given Mr. Keever's wagons all the time we can afford. We move at dawn."

"But they say there's trouble in the country ahead!" She flushed with impatience. "To leave those wagons behind would place them at the mercy of anything that might be waiting for them!"

"They could wait here for another train." He frowned.

"But Mr. Keever's with this train, and—he wants his wagons with him. They have the goods for the big store he wants to start on Bitter Root River."

"Keever has been to me several times!" He turned, facing her again but trying to keep from looking at her too closely. "Others have been here. I am sorry, Miss Wheeler," he was about to turn away again, "but this wagon train leaves the flat at dawn."

"Haven't you any heart at all?" She grabbed his arm now, swinging him back to her. "You know the reports that are coming through—"

"And they are not good," he broke in with a frown. "But all the people in this train are not as rich as Mr. Keever. Some have no money at all. To them it's life or death to get established on their new lands

before the winter lets down on them."

"Then you won't budge a foot?" Her face had gone very pale.

"Not an inch." He tried to laugh. "We move at dawn."

"I think you're positively horrid!" she cried, "I might have known it would be like this!" She turned on her heel and stalked off.

"Whee-eow!" Another voice came to him as the girl walked swiftly away, and as he turned he saw that it was old Brazos Charley Granger, one of his best scouts—a shaggy, red-bearded six-footer in equally shaggy buckskins. "Yuh shore set 'er afire—an' seemed hell-bent on doin' it."

"I'm not waiting any longer for Keever's wagons!"

"An' for that very few will blame yuh," Granger squirted a streak of tobacco juice at a nearby bush. "But, judgin' strictly by a hossman's eye," he grinned, "I'd say she's got the purtiest lines I ever saw on a mare. High-headed, too. Used to havin' her own way. An' yuh play right into the hands of the talk what's goin' the rounds. It jibes with the six wimmin who've shot 'emselves over yuh."

"The—six women!" Captain Long Bill Yancey's eyes widened. "What are you talking about, Charley?"

"Six wimmin." Brazos Charley Granger spat and grinned again, wiping his bearded lips on his sleeve. "That's the talk somebody's started. It may be eight or ten 'fore mornin'. Somebody's out to do yuh down in this train, Bill, an' I think I've got a notion who it is. Just hope yuh don't have to kill 'im 'fore we get to Bitter Root Valley, Montana, but I ain't bettin' no money on it."

"But the women? What women?"

"Pore, love-starved critters," Granger grinned, "a pinin' for Cap'n Long Bill Yancey's arms, him makin' love to 'em, then goin' his way, whistlin' 'Yankee Doodle Doo' for all I know. It's that damn Keever an' nobody else, him an' his short legs an' his belly beginnin' to bottle. I don't like that fella worth a damn!"

"Forget it, Charley!" Yancey clamped a strong hand on his shoulder. "We run into all kinds of things out here. We'll get him and this outfit to the Bitter Root, and then forget about them in a week."

"All 'cept the gal, Bill." Granger looked

at him narrowly. "In the past yo've met 'em an' left 'em, just as they say, though none have shot themselves about yuh or thought of any shootin'. But there comes a time an' a place—an' a gal. I got me one of them queer notions that this fool gal's out to put somebody's banjo down."

They had been together a long time, these two, and sometimes one could hear the other think. Charley Granger had been Captain William Yancey's first sergeant during the war. They had been mustered out together at the close of the struggle between the North and the South. Together they had headed for Virginia, only to find smoke-blackened chimneys and ruins in place of what had once been Honey Spring Hill, with its six thousand acres of fine lands and fine houses, the home of the Yanceys since long before Washington and the Revolution.

Seeing his former captain sick in body and spirit, Charley Granger had led the way to Texas. Down on the Brazos in the spot he had called home before the war there had been adobes and rattlesnakes, toads and bedbugs.

"Not enough for them damn Yankees to bother comin' for," Granger had remarked the day they arrived. "Makes it kinda nice, too, this bein' so plain wildhawg-pore nobody'll think of settin' out to rob yuh."

But restlessness had claimed them both. It was not long before they drifted on to California, then on from one wild frontier to the other until they were in the business of guiding wagon trains anywhere.

Now the '70's were on them, and trouble brewed between the Indians, who had been cheated and robbed until they could stand no more of it, and the white invaders. Up on the Big Horn Generals Crook and Custer were having their hands full with old Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Rain-in-the-Face and many other equally powerful chiefs of the red tribes. Yet the people in this big wagon train wanted to push right on through.

IT HAD been a queer outfit from the beginning, half of it starting at Independence, the rest stringing in along the way in six, eight and ten wagons at a time, until now, north of Fort Laramie, there were over a hundred of them. And among the last to come had been Preacher Walter

Wheeler and his family and the handsome Clinton Keever with his curly black head, his hard hats and a couple of fancy horses—rich man, lawyer, banker, and apparently a jack of all trades.

"An' good at none," had been Brazos Charley Granger's idea of him from the start. "He'll soon be tryin' to run the whole show, an' yuh can set back an' watch the parson try to he'p 'im at every turn."

It was fairly safe here because they were close to Fort Laramie. There had been some grumbling when Yancey had ordered the wagon train circled around the big spring and guards posted as if they were in the heart of the dangerous country. But men had to learn and obey. Drilling a gang of settlers after they struck Indian country was like pulling one's own teeth, and now, with real danger ahead, there was grumbling, back-biting, quarreling breaking out here and there, and a fist fight now and then. It was an old story when so many families were thrown together to face the delay and hardships of the long trail into the Far Country.

Long Bill Yancey did his best to avoid involvement in the petty disputes. As night fell he kept away from all the supper fires except his own, where Milt Daniel, one of the bull-whackers of his two big wagons, took over the pots and pans, "wrestling up" meals as good as any woman's. Granger was left to pick his men and make the rounds, and an hour after the camp had grown quiet Yancey was asleep on a bed in his forward wagon.

But for once Bill Yancey did not sleep the deep and untroubled sleep that usually came to him. He dreamed fitfully, awoke several times. A girl's face recurred in his dreams, and twice beside it appeared the face of Clinton Keever, smug, round and smiling. He was awake fully thirty minutes before Charley Granger let go with blast after blast from an old army bugle a full hour before dawn.

"News for yuh." Granger joined him at the fire Milt Daniel had just started. "The Great-I-Am's six wagons are below the flats. Crept in last night 'fore midnight."

"You've seen them?"

"Nope, but I've been told," scowled the scout. "Big outfits an' a tough-lookin' gang. Tom Clark told me. He was on look-out that way." He nodded to southward.

"Plenty to drink, he said, an' ever'body close to three sheets to the wind when they rolled in an' camped. Maybe this damn Keever an' the preacher will be happy now."

And then, within an hour, they began to roll, the wide circle of canvas-topped shapes turning slowly, the dust rising, bull-whips cracking, a baby somewhere back in the train wailing lustily. Before long it was a wiggling, swaying line slowly pouring off the rise and heading up the side of the fertile valley.

Long Bill Yancey was in his old place a mile ahead of the train. As the trains in '49, '50 and '51 had covered the trail to California, so it was here, with scouts always on the lookout for trouble, for water and grass, and the next camp site for the night.

But they were four days north of the big flat before the first real tingle of excitement swept through the train. Galloping back to Yancey in the middle of the afternoon was a lean and lanky old scout, Lonnie Jackson, and even at a distance Yancey knew that he had spotted something.

"Smoke signals ahead," Jackson told him, swinging his long bay and falling in just to the right of Yancey's tall black gelding. "Way up on a peak ahead, three puffs, four, then three, then four."

"Cheyennes, probably," Yancey's eyes were on the hills ahead, for now they were heading up a little valley with the walls of it to the east and west beginning to mount sharply, making it narrow and deep ahead. "I don't look for anything this quick, Lon."

"Nor I," nodded the scout. "Could be just a little bunch, but even a little bunch can make yuh trouble, tough as they're gettin'."

At that moment they heard hoofs coming at a gallop behind them. Turning in his saddle Yancey saw that it was Angelina Wheeler and Clinton Keever, the girl mounted on a frisky, head-slinging black mare, the man on a big-bellied roan.

"Looks like Keever's takin' her for a horseback ride," grunted the scout.

"Wait a minute!" Yancey threw up his hand when he saw that they were about to pass him with scarcely a glance. "Nobody in the train except the scouts are to go ahead of this line!"

But they ignored him, galloping right

on, and Yancey was suddenly spurred into action. He took down the long rope from the side of his saddle horn, whipped a loop into it, and, a little further on, the rope flung out to settle around the heavy-set figure of Clinton Keever. A moment later the rope had become taut, and Keever was out of the saddle, sliding backward over his horse's rump with a startled yell and landing flat on his seat on the ground with a jar that must have shaken every bone in his body.

"What in the hell is the matter with you?" he cried, rolling over to throw off the rope and stumble to his feet. "What do you mean by this high-handed attack on—a man when his back's turned?"

"When he won't listen any other way," Yancey was recoiling his long rope, "then we employ these methods. You know the orders, Keever."

"This—this is awful!" The girl was swinging back on him now. "I think you're the meanest man I—I ever saw!"

"Yes, Miss Wheeler." He lifted his big hat. "That is taken for granted in several places. But," he smiled quickly, "I believe I still give the orders in this train, and both you and Keever must know them—"

"Steady!" The one word had come from Jackson. On his feet, Keever was just foolish enough in his anger to swing his right hand to his waistband and the butt of a small, nickel-plated revolver. Before he could get the thing loose Yancey covered him with a long six-shooter.

"Don't try that, Keever!" His tone was low, carrying no trace of excitement. "Killing a stumbling fool like you would be no feather in my cap, but I don't like it when a man goes for a gun on me."

"An—an animal like you," sputtered Keever, hands jerking upward, "should be in jail!"

"Out here," Yancey slid his six-shooter back into his holster, "the only law of God or man lies in the quickness of his hand. If you ever try to pull a gun on me again you'd better know a lot more about your draw or I'm apt to drop a ball between those pretty dark eyes."

"And now, Miss Wheeler," he turned to the girl, "you may go back to a safer distance nearer the train."

"Nice of you," sneered Keever, "to take such good care of her!"

"I like pretty things, Keever." A queer, greenish light seemed to twinkle in Long Bill Yancey's eyes. "Maybe, one of these fine days, I'll make her mine."

"You ruthless, egotistical hound!" cried the girl, suddenly beginning to spur away from him. "I hate the sight of you and even the sound of your voice!"

"Better go with her," Yancey wiggled a thumb at Keever. "That mare she's riding is a little wild. If anything happened to her it might not be good for you. And another thing, I noticed you across the creek with her yesterday afternoon. You can cross anytime. You can even take yourself a gallop on ahead, but if you try it with that girl again it'll be your last try. Get going, lawyer!"

"But you haven't heard the end of this!" Keever was glaring as he mounted and spurred away. "You—you damned Rebel!"

"Thanks for the compliment!" Yancey waved his hand and laughed. He spoke to Jackson then: "I wonder if all women are the same?"

"Why, sure!" grinned the scout. "They've been mad at the whole world since Gawd made man first an' they couldn't be there to tell Him how to shape up Adam. We'd all have horns an' tails if they'd been there to have their say-so."

"But yuh watch that Keever fella." The scout's eyes narrowed as he looked at the two galloping riders heading back for the train. "Not him so much as some of his crew. They're bad all the way through—an' this Keever's no better, maybe worse, 'cause he's the kind what'll only poke a knife in yuh when yo're asleep."

"Now about that smoke ahead . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Murder

THEY camped an hour earlier than usual, and the muttering and the grumbling started at once. Any man with one eye and half-sense, they pointed out, could see that the grass was poor here, firewood along the creek actually scarce. They could see that many big wagon trains in the past had camped here, stripping the cottonwoods of their limbs and cutting down scores of them for their fires. But few were those settlers—and least of all Clinton Keever and

Preacher Walter Wheeler—who were able to read the true meaning of it.

"But it's plain as the nose on yore face," explained Brazos Charley Granger when they came to him, one little group after another. "We ain't in a valley now. We've hit a canyon where it's narrow, an' this is one of the few wide places in it, givin' us room in case we might have to fight."

"'Cause somebody saw a few smoke signals, huh?" A lanky old Missouri woman faced him. "An' ain't we seed 'em 'fore this, back yonder east of Fort Laramie, 'twas, an' nobody got all scared then."

"An' some of my fine seed," put in a tall, hawk-nosed old man, "what I aim to plant next spring has started to sprout from the sloppin' an' spillin' of my water barrel this Cap'n Yancey says must be filled on the side of my wagon, even when we're following a doggoned creek! Yuh fellas ain't carryin' seed—an' tomorrow I ain't carryin' no water in that barrel! Yuh go tell Cap'n Yancey that!"

"Lis'en, Mr. Julesburg!" Granger took a step closer, his faded eyes smouldering now. "Tomorrow yore wagon will carry water just like the rest. We're in Indian country now, not in the deep part but in it just the same. Yuh never know when you'll have to swing away from a crick or a river to find fightin' ground in case of an attack, an' it ain't purty without water—the cattle lowin', the children cryin' for it, an' it so close yet can't be had. I know 'bout these things, an' I only tell yuh what other fellas will tell yuh. I've trailed the old Oregon Trail, meanin' lower fork an' upper. I've trailed the Santa Fe, the Southern, the Mormon, the California an' the Spanish, an' some what ain't been named at all."

"An' what'n hell's gonna happen if I just don't fill that barrel or let it be filled?" asked Julesburg.

It was a question Brazos Charley Granger wanted to avoid. To kick a settler out of a wagon train would mean a split, for others would follow him, a general quarrel would flare up. Once a train started splitting it would keep it up, one rebellious group joining another, then the groups themselves splitting after quick quarrels. In the end it would be only a straggling line of wagons, a few here, a few a mile or two away, mere handfuls of settlers laid wide-open to attack in case of trouble.

But Brazos Charley Granger did not have to answer the question. A shout from the north side of the circled and wheel-locked wagons turned them all on their heels, and in a moment it looked as if every man, woman and child was hurrying forward, faces suddenly tense and excited. At the north side of the train they started ganging up around Captain Long Bill Yancey, who was looking northward where two of his scouts were heading back to the train with a strange, reeling figure in the saddle of a gaunt old bay being supported between them.

"One of General Crook's Indian scouts!" The cry came from one of the bull-whackers who had joined the train in Fort Laramie for the long pull through to the Ruby River. "Old Bullet Frank McKnight! Knowned 'im for years, folks!"

The man was soon among them, the scouts at either side pulling up the horses gently. A mob started to rush forward, but Yancey threw out his long arms, holding them back just in time, his yell alone enough to shock them to a stand-still.

"Hands off of him!" he roared. "There's an arrow between his shoulder blades! You're apt to finish killing him when you try to pull him out of that saddle!"

"He's already outa his head, I think." The wagon train scout on the left of the wounded man had slipped quickly out of his saddle. "We come up on 'im with a whole flock of buzzards after 'im a couple of miles up the canyon. He was asetting there babblin' like a crazy fella, his hoss half-dead under 'im, 'cause the hoss has an arrow in his right side just under the sweat leathers of the stirrups. He was atakin' 'bout some thunderin' wipe-out on the Little Big Horn."

"Custer." There was no mistaking the word as the wounded man lifted his head and spoke, the brown beard covering his face matted with the blood that had been oozing from the corners of his mouth, his eyes so bright for a moment they seemed to have tiny lamps shining in their brown depths. "Sittin' Bull, Red Cloud, Rain-in-the-Face, Crazy Horse. Not a man—got away."

"They got me—'round noon." The man had great difficulty in speaking. "They're all 'round yuh, too." Another pause, then: "Hills are full of 'em. Cheyennes, Sioux

... Lots of batches from the little tribes. Guess—it's all—up with me."

"Catch him!" hissed Yancey, leaping forward as the man slumped forward over the saddle horn. "But easy! Easy!"

"Not much need to be easy now, Cap'n Yancey!" The man who had dismounted had grabbed the scout as he was falling. "He's gone past that, 'cause he's dead."

* * *

"'An ill wind,' they say, 'what blows nobody good.'" Brazos Charley was thoughtful that night beside the supper fire. "Ol' Bullet Frank's dyin' was kinda hard on 'im, I reckon, but his comin' in an' livin' long enough to tell his tale has shore made this train quiet. Maybe now some of these plain damn fools an' long-necked jackasses an' their jennies will lis'en when a fella tries to tell 'em somethin' for their own good as for the good of all others in the train."

"But Custer, now?" Long Bill Yancey was still skeptical as he blew and sipped his strong black coffee. "Can you yet believe that General Custer would let himself and his men fall into a trap where there would not be a chance for a man to escape death at the hands of those reds?"

"Other men, big as Custer, I guess," growled back Granger, reaching for his third antelope steak, "have fell in 'em. An' ol'-Sittin' Bull's smart. So's Red Cloud an' Crazy Horse, an' they've been long-smoulderin', them three have—to say nothin' of Rain-in-the-Face. When men are just driv' to hate they can think up a lot of things."

"Maybe," put in Milt Daniel, turning another antelope steak in a pan, "it's the big drive they've been talkin' about—the last push to wipe out the Indian for good. Maybe it's started."

"They'll never wipe out the Indian," Granger reached for the smoke-blackened coffee pot, "until they take his grub away from him—"

"Ain't that what they're doin'?" cut back Daniel. "They've killed off the buffalo herds in the Southwest. Now the hunters are up here at work on the northern herds. Hell, you don't think Washington's havin' all that done just for the fun of it, do you?"

"I wouldn't give ten cents a dozen for the whole damned bunch back there on their padded chairs!" Granger exploded.

It was Yancey's chance to get away from them, for these two would find something

to argue about half the night, once they were started. He had finished his supper, and now he rose, washed and dried his pan and cup, and strolled away toward the lower side of the train.

They were already preparing Bullet Frank McKnight's grave a few rods from where Preacher Walter Wheeler's two big wagons were standing. Wheeler was standing there in the firelight, looking tall, lean and grim in his dead-black garb, but it seemed to be Clinton Keever who was doing all the bossing as he sat on a white handkerchief spread on a flat-topped rock at the foot of the grave.

"Make it ten feet deep!" he was ordering, the men with the picks and the shovels working away. "After the body's down and the earth packed back we'll cover the top of it with ashes from our campfires. The Indians, then, will not know where to find it and dig it up to mutilate it after the train has moved on."

"Six feet down," observed Yancey as he came up, "would be more than enough. I've never known an Indian who would dig half that far to take a body from a grave, and certainly not just for mutilation. When they mutilate," he shrugged, "that generally takes place before a victim is dead, and they learned that trick from white men, like scalping and the most of the rest of it."

"But," Keever wheeled upon him, "I have read all about the devils, Yancey! Besides, the body of that poor scout is now in the hands of the Reverend Wheeler, and his soul is with God. I beg of you not to come here and disturb us in our efforts to do the civilized thing."

"Well put, Keever!" Yancey turned away, knowing that Keever had just been smart enough to score a point or two more in the parson's eye. He had had a glimpse of the girl, too, standing back in the shadow of her father's wagon beside a chair in which a tall, dark woman was sitting. The girl and her mother had heard it all, and possibly Keever would score there, also.

Yancey turned away and was walking slowly back to his big wagons when a shot out on the flats where the stock was being guarded suddenly threw the entire train into high-pitched excitement.

"Indians! Indians!"

A few moments later—with everybody grabbing weapons—a white-faced Missouri

farmer boy came tearing in through the break between two big wagons.

"Indians!" he yelled. "Indians! Gawd A'mighty, they're swarmin' all over up yonder!"

"Where? Where?"

"Yonder on the tops of them high rocks!" he wailed. "I saw 'em agin' the moonlight just beginnin' to show!"

"Hold your fire!" It was Yancey's turn to yell a second later as a long, lean man started galloping past him with a heavy rifle. "Wait until we know more about this! Don't ask for a fight, fool!"

It was their first real scare, and hurrying out he could soon see moving figures high up there on the east rim, for the light of the rising moon beyond the hills seemed to be getting stronger every second. One careful look told him what those moving figures were. They were Indians and ponies, but they were old Indians and old ponies, a line of them moving southward with all their belongings. And that meant that they were friendly and heading toward Fort Laramie for protection from their own tribe's young and headstrong warriors who would as soon turn upon them as any one else if they refused to aid them in a fight.

"Hold your fire!" Yancey kept yelling, not wanting murder done here if he could help it. "Hold your fire! Those are old Indians on the move! Look at their belongings the ponies are dragging on poles! They mean no harm to us!"

"But a damn Indian is a damn Indian!" bawled one of Clinton Keever's men, racing up with a long rifle. Others from Keever's six wagons followed him. "I come 'way West to kill me one!"

There was another shot before Yancey, Jackson or Granger could stop them. From the rim a terrified scream came back to them, and then there was a bedlam of shooting, led by Keever's men. Their long rifles made gashes of flame in the night.

"Stop it, damn you, stop it!" yelled Yancey. "This is cold-blooded murder, you damned fools! You're shooting old men, old squaws and children up there!"

As if in answer to him a longer, sharper report of a rifle came from the end of one of the wagons behind him. An instant later he heard Clinton Keever, the great, commanding general rallying his troops from behind the lines.

"Pour it into them, men! Up and at them as we took the dirty Rebels at Shiloh, and wiped out Pickett's charge!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Funeral

IT WAS worse than murder before they could get it stopped. Bill Yancey knocked three men sprawling with the butt of a six-shooter. Not quite so patient as that, Brazos Charley Granger rammed the muzzle of a six-shooter into a man's ribs and thumbed the hammer twice, pitching him dead across the barrel of his hot rifle.

Seeing that it was steadily growing worse and was apt to wind up in a general fight among themselves right here in the train, Bill Yancey threw back his head, pinched his nose, and let out a noise that might have been the scream of a diving eagle. It was a sound that attracted the attention of every scout, a noise that instantly put them on their toes to listen.

"Every scout, listen!" he called, giving a command now that was to shock men back to reason or send them straight to hell. "Stand back and shoot down any man, woman or child who keeps up this senseless killing. *Now stop it!*"

The firing stopped. Men turned to look at each other, a fierce light filling a few eyes here and there, fear coming into others.

"They're jist fools enough to do it!" growled a lanky Missourian, turning himself with his rifle at trail as he headed back for his big, rattletrap wagon. "An'—an' them, over thar, are set to back his play." He nodded toward a wild looking group of men lined up beside the seven huge freighters that had joined the train at Fort Laramie. "They're his kind, them are."

Not one of the men of the freighters had fired at the rim. They knew this country and what could come from men losing their heads and killing harmless Indians, especially old bucks and squaws. But each man beside those wagons held a rifle, or had a six or a five-shooter shoved forward on his belt, ready to let go if need be.

"Where's Clinton Keever?" Yancey was walking back toward the wagons when he spoke. "I want to see him."

Everybody heard him, and he had intended for all to hear—anything now to

keep their minds off the rim and the scared and hurrying line of ragged shapes up there. But Keever did not answer him. He had wheeled and gone half-scurrying back to the place where the men had just finished digging McKnight's grave before the first shot was fired. Now he was back on the rock, his rifle having disappeared. As he saw Yancey striding up he came to his feet, the blood draining from his face and leaving it pasty-yellow in splotches.

"I suppose, now," he cried, instantly on the defense, "you would like to blame me!"

"Just for what you said, *general!*" Yancey walked straight on and into him. "About the Rebels at Shiloh! You're not in a court room now with a gang to back your play. Try yourself a man!"

Near the wagon Angelina Wheeler screamed. Yancey had struck one blow just as Keever's right hand swept to his waistband, fiddling for the butt of his little revolver. The crack of the smacking fist could be heard sixty yards away. It seemed to tear Keever loose from the ground, to hold him suspended in the air for an instant, and then another blow smashed into his nose and mouth. Like some kind of a rag doll, Keever slumped backward, plopping limply into the open grave behind him.

"And for two pins," Yancey fired a glance at the men with the picks and shovels, "I'd have you cover him up and leave him there!"

"*Captain Yancey!*" Walter Wheeler was striding forward now. "That was the most brutal attack on an innocent man I ever saw!"

"Keep out of this, preacher!" Yancey's eyes blazed. "I'll respect you as long as you respect yourself, but don't go too far!"

"An' he's tellin' yuh true!" Brazos Charley Granger had followed Yancey and stood beside him now. "Better hold yore lip!"

"Why didn't you bring a few more men, Captain Yancey?" The girl came forward and halted just at her father's left.

"Miss Wheeler," Yancey's voice was cold steel now, "I'm not in the habit of quarreling with women, but let me tell you something—"

"I don't want to hear it!" she cried.

"Nor I!" joined in the preacher. "I've never seen such brutality!"

"No, you've never seen it!" snapped back

Yancey, thoroughly angered now. "You've never been any place to see it! But let me tell you something whether you want to hear it or not. This is the most cowardly gang of scum it has ever been my misfortune to haul into the frontier. None of you want to listen to a damned thing!" He took a step forward and felt Granger grab his arm. "And don't stand there with your mouth open as if you're shocked by a little straight talk. You'll hear a hell of a lot of it out here—and so will your daughter!"

"Those were helpless old men and women

up there!" He pointed a long arm toward the rim, eyes still blazing. "Indians do not travel at night, unless it's a war-party or some great danger makes them move!"

"And how do you know," put in the girl, "that it wasn't a war-party!"

"Any fool could see that!" he half-yelled back at her. "And any fool would know that this can have terrible consequences! Some youth will sneak away and go back to tell what has happened, and then you'll see women and children dying in this train—and I fear it won't be long before you see

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a few of all those sights, Miss Wheeler." "But you had no right to attack Mr. Keever!"

"Let Keever speak for himself!" he barked. "It's always some white fool like him who starts the trouble with the reds out here. White men lie to them, cheat them, even take their squaws away from them and I've seen your hard-hatted filth of the human race shoot them from the windows of cars on the railroad—just to be able to go back East and say they came West and shot an Indian!"

"Yeah," cried Granger, "just like that fool was hollerin' a little while ago—an' if yuh had any ears, ma'am, yuh coulda heard 'im! But come on, Bill!" He gave Yancey's arm a jerk. "What's the use standin' here tryin' to explain somethin' to people what won't know what yo're talkin' about when yo're through?" Yancey swung away.

A scouting trip to the rim brought back terrible things for the people of the train to see at dawn. The first to come was the body of an old, old squaw, then a second and a third, then a mere child and the bodies of two toothless and wrinkled old bucks. One after the other, in a row, Yancey had them laid on the ground, and his men started opening a wide grave that would hold them all.

"There they are!" he told them, bitterly. "The great work of great and brave men. I suppose," a queer twinkle came into his eyes as he looked at Wheeler who had just finished preaching a long sermon over the blanket-wrapped body of the dead scout, "that you will be kind enough to say a few words here?"

"Me?" The preacher was startled. "Sir, I preach the gospel only for human beings, not wild animals!"

"Then I suppose it's up to me." Yancey took off his big hat, men and women staring at him in amazement. "I call upon the Great Mystery to take them where they belong, and, if there be life after death, to teach them to forgive those who so mercilessly murdered them." The rest of his words were in Indian tongue, the languages of the fighting Cheyennes and the Sioux, for these were a mixture of both the tribes, and as he spoke he kept his eyes on the sky, the place where the red god ruled all below. Gradually head after head was bowed, and men and women kneeled with him when he

kneeled, not knowing what he was saying as he offered up his final prayer. "Amen, Great Mystery!"

"Captain Yancey!" Walter Wheeler was the first to leap forward and thrust out his hand, his eyes shining. "I—I'm sorry!"

"It's all right, parson!" Yancey gripped the big hand. "Out here, sir, we sometimes come to the conclusion that all things have souls—even the horse and the ox."

"An', sometimes," half-whispered Brazos Charley from the sidelines, glancing toward a certain wagon, "even wimmin."

CHAPTER FOUR

Water Hole of Death

BRAZOS CHARLEY grinned after the train was again on the move. "It's what I'd call whippin' a dog with his own tail," he observed. "Gosh, but that sky-pilot shore looked bad."

They had gotten off to a late start; the sun was already an hour high in the sky. In all the tremendous excitement, the body of the man Brazos Charley had shot had not been found until after dawn. It was a great mystery even then as to who had shot him, and Charley Granger kept his mouth shut when the body was picked up between two big slabs of rocks surrounded by a few clumps of dense bushes.

"Looks like your work, Charley," Yancey had half-growled when he caught Granger alone. "Why?"

"He put a bead on me when I was tryin' to stop 'im from that crazy shootin'," had frowned the scout. "I just triggered 'im a little. Ain't like you, Bill. When a man goes for a gun on me—well, hell, I just kill 'im then an' there. Saves me havin' to do it later on, 'cause if they come at yuh once on the kill, they'll shore come ag'in, like this Keever's gonna do."

They had seen no more of Keever after he had crawled out of the grave and gone stumbling away. One of his men had carried coffee to his wagon. Some had expected him to show some sign of life when they were burying the man Granger had killed, for it was one of his own men, but again there had been no sign of him.

"An' the gal don't seem interested this mornin'," observed Granger. "She ain't gone near his damn wagon—an' that'll be

hard on 'im, proud as his kind are." Yancey was silent, in no mood for conversation, and he was often that way of late, without apparent cause.

In the late afternoon they were to camp at a water hole that was like a small lake near the north side of a tall tableland. Yancey had camped there several times before under the cottonwoods surrounding the water and knew that there would be plenty of wood this time. But Lonnie Jackson galloped back to him an hour before sundown with a tale that stung him.

"Some trouble ahead, Cap'n Yancey!" he exclaimed, swinging his horse in a quick circle to fall in beside the black gelding. "That big water hole ahead is poisoned." "Poisoned!" Yancey's eyes widened. "How do you know?"

"It's a buffalo waterin' place, as we know," explained the scout, placing both hands on the broad horn of his saddle and standing stiffly in his stirrups to take some of the kinks out of his hips and legs. "It's surrounded now by dead buffer, yards deep an' piled in a big ring 'round the water, some lyin' with their heads in it. Some have been skint, an' some ain't skint yet. That means a big buffer outfit workin' up here, an' they're workin' 'way ahead of the shootin' season when the hair'll be better with winter comin' on. The Indians ain't gonna like it."

Yancey had heard of buffalo hunters using poison, but very few—as far as he knew—had been successful with it. But when he came in sight of the trees and the water hole he could see that somebody had made a land office killing here.

A great cloud of buzzards soared up from the ground as they approached the water hole. And the dead buffalo were all around—bulls, cows, calves and half-grown, some rolled over on their flanks, others slumped on their bellies like sleeping dogs. The stench of it was overwhelming. A wagon train would not be able to camp within a mile of it.

"An' now," gasped Jackson, a man long hardened to almost any sight or smell, but sick with what lay before them here, "maybe some of them grumblin' jackasses in the train are gonna know why yuh wanted them water barrels on the wagon kept filled all the time. There's some trees a mile on 'round that soggy place where we could

pitch, but the mosquitoes are gonna eat ever' one of us up if we do."

"We'll stay—away from—the mosquitoes, too!" gasped back Yancey, covering his nose with his hand. "God, but—but this is awful, Lonnie, awful!"

"What in the world is it?" Wheeler and his daughter were coming up, the preacher mounted on a big iron-gray, the girl again on her black mare. "I—I have never smelled such a terrible smell!"

"White men, parson!" Yancey was still staring at the hellish scene. "One of the things they'll do for gold! Better gallop back to the train, Lon." He glanced at the scout. "There's some wind from the east, and the train had better take the benefit of it. It's enough to make all the women and children sick."

"But—but," Wheeler was gasping for breath now, "what in the world is the meaning of such terrible destruction?"

"Buffalo hunters!" exclaimed Yancey, turning his horse to look at him now. "Things like this are what makes the Indian paint his face and take up his gun to go out and fight. This is the good meat for the mouths of his squaws and his childreq. In other words," his eyes narrowed, "his own life's blood. Without it he can only starve—and die."

"But—but it's an unholy waste of the flesh!"

"Waste?" Yancey was able to manage a small but jarring little laugh now. "Who cares for the waste? And the buffalo hunter?" A slow, hard smile twisted his lips. "He wants the hide, not the meat unless it's the hump or a tongue from a young cow or bull he had shot with a rifle. He leaves the rest to the birds of the air, the coyote and the wolf. Indians see sights like this—and they go and kill!"

"Father, look!" The girl was suddenly standing in her stirrups and pointing westward toward the high back of a ridge beyond the rim of the tableland. "Smoke signals! It—it's an Indian over there!"

"And probably many beyond him!" Yancey answered her. "Look over here, if you will." He pointed eastward to the great back of another ridge where three round, dark puffs were suspended in the air for a few seconds before they drifted on with the wind. "They seem to be watching us from both sides."

"Father," the girl said flatly, I'm scared!"

Yancey laughed bitterly. He was studying more of those smoke puffs lifting to eastward. "I'm never scared more than three-fourths of the time when I'm in Indian country and see sights like that around the water hole under those trees.

"We can expect to see Indians most any old time now, parson."

CHAPTER FIVE

Bullets for the Hopeless

EVERYBODY in the train saw the great ring of dead buffalo as the wagons creaked east of the trees when old Lonnie Jackson led them past the spot. Yancey, the preacher and the girl had ridden on. They led the way past the trees in the swampy ground and on almost within a mile of the north tip of the tableland. Again there was a grumble among the emigrants, but it was not so much now, for all of them had seen the smoke signals.

Yancey posted double guards when night-fall came and the darkness was heavy enough for no watching eyes in the distance to see where he was placing his outposts. The night passed in ominous peace and quiet and at dawn they were rolling again.

The route led down off the north slope of the tableland where it thrust itself into a great draw with steep walls at either side. Before they had traveled an hour down the slope, Lonnie Jackson once more galloped back with a wicked report.

"She's hell ahead, an' I don't mean *maybe*!" he exclaimed, swinging in as always to the right. "It's the buffer outfit. Fifteen of the biggest buffer wagons yuh ever saw, almost a brand-new outfit. There's just six men left outa twenty two."

"Indians!"

"Yep, Indians," nodded the scout, soberly. "Cheyennes, Sioux, Crow an' Tongue—mixed bunch by what's left of the arrows scattered 'round. Musta slipped right up on the camp an' got 'em hoppin' outa their blankets an' robes before they let out a yell. Couldn't be old-timers, gettin' caught like that."

"And six are still alive?"

"Alive, yeah," frowned the scout, "an' that's all yuh can say. I'm shore the squaws was set to work on 'em, an' yuh know what squaws can do to a man. The six are tied to what was left of the wagons—mostly just them steel wheels with foot-wide tires on 'em. Cap'n Yancey, they've been just about skinned alive on their feet, kickin' an' hollerin'."

"Damn!" Yancey turned and looked back at the head of the train a mile away. "This is going to be tough on the women and children!"

"An' let 'er be tough!" scowled the scout. "They've got to have somethin' to jar 'em! Once we get the wimmin on our side they'll help boss the men an' maybe knock some sense in their damn heads."

"This is the come-back for poisoning that water hole, Lon." Yancey was grim, almost white-faced. "I knew the Indians would do something about it."

"But they have to follow up the herds," interjected the scout. "Remember that I once tried my hand at it, an' couldn't stick. Smell got me down. Man gets to where he don't know whether he's a walkin' buffer hide or a man, an' any place yuh would walk into people would start scatterin' to get off to one side where the wind would take yuh 'way from 'em. Poisonin' water—well, that drops 'em in a pile. Damn it," he said glancin' back over his shoulder, "here comes that preacher an' his gal agin! Don't tell 'em a thing, *please*!"

"They'll have to know sooner or later, Lon." Yancey frowned, and when Wheeler and his daughter galloped up he told them what to expect on ahead. "And," he finished, "there's not much of a chance for us to avoid it, unless we hold up the train."

"Then, for heaven's sake hold it!" cried the preacher.

"And run the risk of having to camp in the draw tonight?" Yancey shook his head. "You'll soon see what happened to the men who tried that—and were killed for their stupidity!"

"But can't you see," cried the preacher, "such a sight will scar the minds, the souls and bodies—"

"*Father!*" Angelina Wheeler's voice was sharp and commanding. "Let that decide you."

She was pointing now to a tall, sharp

peak to the northwest and well back from the rim of the deep draw itself. Up there on a black and white pony sat a figure, the morning sunlight upon it, turning it to glistening bronze, a great-feathered war-bonnet stirring in the wind.

It was an Indian, far out of rifle range, and as cold and arrogant as one could find all up and down this wild frontier. His arms were crossed on his chest. He silently watched those settlers who had come to create more havoc with his fine hunting lands.

"I think Captain Yancey will know best as to what we should do or not do," the girl said, quietly.

"Ye-es," agreed the preacher, balls of perspiration as large as buckshot streaming down his face, "I—I suppose he will!"

It was anything but pretty when they got to the scene of the massacre. Yancey noticed the broken-open rum kegs right away. Indians, of course, had staved in the heads of those kegs, but there were other signs here that told him there had been a great amount of drinking before this buffalo outfit had grown quiet for the night.

"Four's still alive now." Jackson nodded to the human shapes still lashed to the wagon wheels, and touched the butt of a six-shooter meaningly. "Nothin' can save 'em, Cap'n Yancey."

"No, nothing, but wait, and then," his eyes narrowed, "of course."

The last two words carried the slightest hint of a nod, then he walked back to the preacher and his daughter, taking them firmly but gently by the arms and turning them to face back down the draw. Wheeler

looked at him, half-startled, but he noticed that the girl lowered her head and closed her eyes, lips moving soundlessly.

"God!" Wheeler groaned when the first shot came, and he must have glanced at his daughter, for his head had quickly lowered and he was a man praying with his eyes closed when the second, third and fourth shots sent rolling reports down the draw toward the coming wagon train.

"It was the only way!" The girl was the first to look up, big tears on her cheeks, her lips trembling. "And—and you wanted to come to this wild country, giving up and leaving all we had in a land of peace and harmony."

"God called me, Angelina."

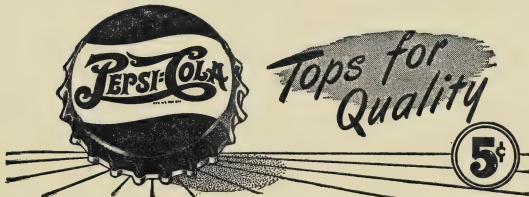
"And what a call!" she smiled faintly, teardrops still clinging to her long, black lashes. "I—I guess I just don't understand."

CHAPTER SIX

A Cry for Help

YANCEY lost no time here, for he knew now what was in store for them. He had all the bodies rolled into a deep, dry ravine, and shale from above raked down to cover them while Wheeler stood close by with his Bible in his hand. Not one of the wagons was allowed to stop. They had to get out of here, and no settler lifted his or her voice to complain or try to tell him what to do.

It was the same when Clinton Keever's big wagons rolled past the place with Keever—at last—showing his face on a high seat, his eyes still black and blue, his mouth appearing twisted around to the left, a mur-



derous look about him as he saw Yancey.

"We must get out of here," Yancey kept pounding that into them as he mounted and swung on to his old place at the head of the train, calling out to people as he passed their wagons. "Don't let anything stop us until we get to higher ground."

"Oh, Lord, we'll all be kilt!" It was the man who had complained about having to carry his barrels filled and his seed sprouting. "I just knowed it 'fore I left Missouri!"

"Then why'n hell didn't yuh stay in Missouri!" screeched the lanky woman beside him. "Back there on ol' pore ground eatin' rabbit outa the season an' livin' for the rest on corn pone!"

By noon this same man's wagon broke down, an old wheel giving away at last on the rear spindle and pitching the back end of the wagon over to the right. Men behind him cursed and ranted until bullwhackers of the seven big freighters cut a cottonwood pole as thick as a man's thigh and got it under the axle at a long slant.

"It'll hold yuh up!" they howled at him. "Leastwise 'til yuh get outa here!"

"It's said," a man howled back, "if they hit us in daylight they'll hit us here on the slope!"

Yancey and his scouts were already on that slope. It was mean and dangerous enough in itself without men having to think about fighting Indians on the way. And Yancey was still hoping for the best, hoping that the reds—if they were up here and intended to attack—would stick to their rarely changing idea of never opening a fight until just before dawn, and then only after creeping into position without being seen or heard until some chief let out a yell.

"There they are!" It was Brazos Charley Granger who shattered all Yancey's hopes as they were nearing the top. "About forty of 'em, Bill, an' they're acomin' to beat hell!"

And then the guns opened up, men below at the sides of the wagons cursing and yelling at the drivers, urging them to keep throwing the whips down on the backs of the straining cattle so that not a wheel would stop rolling.

"A few white men are with 'em!" One of the scouts shouted, "Pour it into them first, boys, if yuh can!"

Not for an instant could the wagoners there on the slope hesitate. A stop, even a short one, would have given the fighters above them the advantage of sweeping closer and holding them there. Up and up, firing as they rode, Yancey and his men kept on, a cheer going up when the charging ponies bearing down on them suddenly swerved away. The Indians turned aside, leaving the few whites with them to charge straight into the certain death pouring on them.

"Keep 'em going!" Yancey let out the cry when they struck the top. "It's only a small party! Don't let them stop!"

And then it was over. The remaining Indians and two of the whites fled. Suspecting a trap, Yancey whistled his men back, and now all attention was turned to getting the train to the top and out on ground where there would be fighting room for all concerned.

* * *

"They make the damndest mistakes, Indians do!" Granger chuckled that night beside their campfire on a tall flat. "Ain't worth a thing when it comes to fightin' in daylight!"

"Don't be too sure of yourself," warned Yancey. "We're just getting into the real fighting country, you know."

"Yeah, I know," growled back the scout. "An' she may yet be hell arollin' the mountains down. Only one thing I am shore about." He was suddenly grinning. "The preacher an' his gal have swung yore way. It looks like they've dropped Keever."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that, either," frowned Yancey. "I see that Mr. Keever is back at the Wheeler campfire for his supper tonight, and all seems well."

"The hell he is!" Granger struggled to his feet, glowering along the wagons and the fires in the big circle. "Musta just invited 'imself. He ain't got too many manners when it comes to eatin'."

"Sit back where you were, Charley. Want the whole train to know we're talking about them?"

"Whole train has maybe talked itself out," growled the scout, dropping back to a squat. "'Bout yuh an' her, of course. But Keever seems to have some kind of a bull-ring in her daddy's nose."

"A church, yeah," put in Milt Daniel, pouring coffee for himself. "I've heard the

talk. Seems that Keever's going to set him up with a big church when we get to the Bitter Roots."

"So that's it!" Yancey grinned. "He really must be after the girl."

"An' here yuh are foolin' 'round. Yuh can't go after a woman like yuh used to lead cavalrymen into a fight, hittin' like chain lightnin' acomin', ridin' down an' through, rippin' bloody hell outa things. Now what what?" Granger asked, grinning.

The camp had been unusually quiet in spite of the excitement during the day. Guards were out, the wagons wheel-locked, earth banked up on the outer side of the wheels—a camp a wolf could not approach closer than six hundred yards before keen eyes would have discovered him. Now a shot and a yell had come from the distance, throwing everything into an uproar as a thin voice wailed above the furious clatter of hoofs:

"Let me through! I've come for help!"

It was a mere youth on a long-flanked old sorrel, and it was a wonder that he had not been killed, for a nervous settler out there to northward had opened his fire first, intending to ask his questions afterwards.

"Where's the train cap'n!" cried the boy, half-staggering the old sorrel through an opening left between two of the wagons. "We've got to have help! I'm from Cap'n Luther Martin's, train, twelve, maybe fifteen miles away. They've had us surrounded four days now, the Indians have!"

"An' that's the answer to that little bunch what hit us on the slope back there!" grunted Granger. "Just a hold-back crowd to keep us from goin' on an' findin' out what's up."

"How did you get through, young fellow?" Yancey was already after the boy, leaving it to his men to try to quiet the train.

"Our train come in from the east an' passed the big flat behind you. We saw the buffalo hunters in their camp, an' as Cap'n Martin was dyin' yesterday mornin' he said we might get help from 'em. The reds had scattered our stock, what they didn't kill, an' I crawled away on my belly an' found this hoss a mile from camp, an'—an' here I am. We're in a right bad way, mister."

"It's too bad, son, but we can't help you!" At last Clinton Keever was again trying to

take a hand in the running of the train. He had come hurrying up, evidently forgetting his black and blue marks. All excited now, he had stopped three or four yards away. "We have our own women and children to think about!"

"Get ready to roll!" Yancey ignored him, turning to send the call all over the train. "The stock will be brought in immediately! Women will drive the wagons! All men will flank the train with their rifles! Pack up and hurry! There is not too much time!"

"I'm not going to move a wagon!" cried Keever. "Damn it, Yancey, you're leading these poor women and children to death!"

"You're a damned liar, Keever!" Yancey wheeled on him now. "Let the reds ahead wipe out that train, then they'll swing back to wipe us off the face of the earth. We're going through. I know Luther Martin. He always handles a big train, and if Luther Martin would send to a buffalo hunter's camp for help, then they're hard hit with plenty of Indians around them."

"But the boy has said that Martin's dead!"

"Sure!" Yancey sneered at him now. "But he talked before he died, and it would matter little whether he did or not. And you now," he took a step forward, eyes blazing, "get out of my sight. If you want your wagons to stay here, then let them stay, but if anybody else tries to hang back with you, then I'll have your wagons set on fire and burned to the ground—and any other wagon that wants to remain. Hurry!" He stepped back, voice rolling all over again. "We're going to roll!"

"Watch 'im, Bill!" hissed Granger as Keever wheeled away. "I never saw a man so scared an' desperate. He'll do anything!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

End of the Wagon Trail

MOVING any wagon train through hostile country at night was deadly dangerous business, but the big flat was high and wide, almost as level as a floor, and Yancey knew the country on ahead of that. With three good men out in front under Lonnie Jackson, to scout the lay of the land ahead, he formed the train into two strong lines fifty yards apart so that

the forward ends and the rear could swing together in case of a surprise.

"An' Keever's wagons fell in line, too," grinned Brazos Charley Granger. "That crew looks like he mighta got the last one straight outa a penitentiary somewhere. But they bristled up to 'im, the big un tellin' 'im plain out to go to hell. But he's scared, Keever is. Never saw a man goin' to pieces so fast. Jumps at his shadow. He'd run from the call of a turtle dove!"

"And he would try to let us believe he was a soldier!" Yancey's lips twisted into a little smile. "God pity men who might have had to fight under him as an officer! But no matter," he shrugged. "Many of his kind are coming West these days. In a good town where it's safe enough for them, they hang out their shingles and start in—"

And then they were silent, leaving it to men behind them to keep the big train on the move. Guards were out everywhere, on the flanks and bringing up the rear. Eight yards from the wagons marched and rode men and boys, all who could carry a rifle and shoot it. Only a flying wedge of Indians might break through those lines, and then they would find the lines folding in on them.

Once over the flat, the train would come close to doubling itself. The stock might have to be divided to help pull some of Luther Martin's wagons, but once the train was doubled it would be a real army on the move, and only a real army of Indians would dare attack it.

An hour passed, and another, but the wagons were slow, the cattle tired. In spite of the whips—poured on mercilessly at times by excited women—the train was jogging along slowly, making no more than four miles an hour at best. It seemed an eternity before it reached the north tip of the high flat.

"There they are!" exclaimed Granger, lifting a long arm to point. "Indians all 'round 'em, some of the wagons afire."

They were looking now into a long, deep valley with one of the usual little creeks in this particular part of the country streaking down the center of it between a long line of shaggy cottonwoods. On a tall, flat-topped rise of the bank half-way up the valley was the wagon train whipped into a tight circle. The flames from three

or four of the wagons crackled skyward, gunfire making flashes of orange light in the darkness. The defenders were trying to fight off the howling and screeching ring of feathered shapes on ponies flying around and around them.

"Thank God we're going to be on time!" cried Yancey. "At least I think we are, Charley!"

"An' I got my old horn." Granger stroked the army bugle hanging to his saddle horn. "It'll check 'em up a little, maybe, when we get close enough."

"But it's an old trick," frowned Yancey, "and they're getting pretty tired of it by now."

"Still it works yet!" half-grinned the scout. "No red can ever be shore whether it's real cavalry pourin' down on 'im or not. 'Sides all that, it lets the whites know that whites are comin' an' gettin' close, an' yuh know what a great, liftin' feelin' that is when yo're all fought down an' not carin' much how long yo're gonna have to keep bearin' up under the grind. Here comes the wagons!"

And the wagons were there, beginning now to pour over the rim, the brakes being set, the long lines of yoked oxen stringing out with but little work for them down the long slope. As the rear wagons were coming up to tilt over the rim Yancey thought he heard a scream in the noise behind him, but he was nearly a mile down the slope before Walter Wheeler came thundering down on him, his face white in the darkness.

"It's Keever!" he cried. "My God, Captain Yancey, he took one look at the fight down there and went crazy! My daughter was on her half-broken mare. He grabbed the reins and wheeled his horse away with her, shouting something about going to the safety of some settlement on the Missouri River!"

"But that's days away!" yelled Yancey. "Why in the hell didn't you stop the fool!"

"Stop him?" Wheeler shoved back his big black hat and rubbed a long welt on his head. "Sir, he knocked me off my horse with the butt of that heavy quirt he carries on his saddle, and he was gone before I could pick myself up from the ground."

"We've got to stop him!" cried Yancey, wheeling his horse. "Lead on and into it, Charley! You're as good as I am any day!"

And then he was gone, tearing back up the slope, the preacher turning his horse to spur after him.

* * *

Clinton Keever was still riding like a maniac, his tall horse and the half-fool mare not likely to last five miles before dropping dead under their saddles. Adding the girl, slapping her with his quirt to keep her quiet, he was actually trying to do what he thought was best. Indians, he had read, were merciless when a white man or a woman fell into their hands.

"They pour your eyes full of powder and set a spark to it!" he wailed. "They tie you up and slowly skin you alive. Oh, Angelina darling, I am only trying to save you!"

"But look there!" screamed the girl when they were a mile away from the train. "Those are Indians closing in on us! Look! They're cutting us off from behind! Give me my reins!"

"Ride!" he half-screamed. "Ride, Angelina, ride!"

It was then, seeing himself in a trap, that Keever threw her the reins, and swung

his blowing and snorting horse to the left, trying to thunder his way through an opening.

The girl immediately tried to turn back, for there were an even dozen Indians around them now, a small scouting party that had been keeping at a safe distance while they watched Captain Yancey's train. Seeing the crazed Keefer and the girl coming, they had closed in, probably not wanting to believe their own eyes.

A shot sounded and then came Keever's voice, wilder than ever before. Indians had closed in on him, one on each side, another blocking the way ahead with his pony, another flinging out of a clump of rocks and brush to take him from behind.

"No! no! no!" he wailed. "White man red man's friend! White man big white father—Oh, My God!"

And the girl heard no more. Her crazy mare had seen an opening and had swung into it, a shot blazing at her from the left. Zig-zagging now, the mare much faster than the ponies, she kept going. The Indians began to call out to each other.

Fox hunting back home had taught the



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girl something, and she thought of it now. The one shot made her cool instead of excited. She was not letting the mare out but holding her down, letting the Indians think that they were just about to catch her, at the same time leading them closer and closer to the wagon train, the last of it now about to go over the rim and down the slope.

And the Indians were falling for the trick, getting so close to her that a red hand reached for her now and then. Once a young buck was close enough to swing the butt of a rifle at her head, and she felt it brush her shoulder. She crouched lower over the mare's flying mane and fought for slack on the reins.

It looked as if it was about all up when the mare stumbled, but the mount of an Indian just behind her stumbled an instant later. Once more she was in the clear, hoping the outer line of whites behind the wagons would see her peril and come galloping to her.

Coming up on a fringe of low pines, she again flattened herself forward as a sudden noise came from behind. A shot sang out at her, then another, and now the mare screamed and stumbled again, caught just behind the saddle by a rifle ball.

"Keep coming, Angelina!" It was Long Bill Yancey's voice suddenly coming at her through the pines. "Keep her on her feet as long as you can! Throw yourself clear when she falls!"

And, then, Yancey was flying past her, then her father, then two more wild-eyed riders. Walter Wheeler seemed to have forgotten his Bible for the moment. He had an old-fashioned pair of pistols, and as Yancey and others started shooting Walter Wheeler, too, blazed away to kill his first and only Indian. The rest of the red men fell back suddenly, whipping and kicking their tired ponies into greater efforts for the get-away.

Fifty yards beyond the fringe of pines, Angelina Wheeler felt the world swing up, sway and give away under her. It was the mare making one last desperate lunge, and then going down, rolling on the ground for yards before she straightened out and died.

"Yancey, I told you Indians were not human!" It was Walter Wheeler's voice when the girl opened her eyes. "They're

wolves, tigers—anything but human beings when they come out to fight!"

"I still say," answered Yancey in a calm voice, "that the white man has only brought out the worst in them."

"Wonder what happened to Keever?"

A rider thundered up. "He was just lucky enough to get 'imself killed before they took him away for the squaws to work on!"

"You found him?" That was Yancey, and the girl looked up now and saw that he was sitting flat on the ground, her head in his lap. "Where?"

"Six or eight hundred yards from where we first spotted the gal." A tall man was sliding out of his saddle. "A couple more of the boys are bringin' 'im in. He musta tried to break away, an' some buck musta jabbed a gun close an' shot the top of his head off."

"We'll get back to the train now!" Yancey was rising, lifting her with him. Then, helped up to his arms by her father, the girl was riding away with them. Before they had gone far her arm came up, around Yancey's neck, slow, tired sobs shaking her.

* * *

"Jackson's swingin' in on 'em from the west with one side of the train, an' Brazos Charley's pourin' in on the east. They're flankin' them, Captain Yancey!"

A grizzled scout gave Yancey the report as he galloped on down the slope. The girl was up behind her father's saddle.

"It oughtn't to take long!"

The wagons were well ahead. One line swung to the right, the other to the left. Not far beyond them, in the center of the split, was the circled train, the tall flames from another wagon licking skyward, the noise of the guns still raging on the valley floor. And then another sound came back to Yancey as he struck the bottom of the slope.

It was a bugle call, brassy and rolling, the notes swelling up in a great burst.

"That's Brazos Charley!" yelled a scout. "Damned if he was ever better even if he did sorter get off with a gaggin' start!"

"But it ain't foolin' the Indians this time!" cried a rider behind the preacher. "Gawd A'mighty, there must a thousan' of 'em fightin' that wagon train!"

"Let it be two thousan'!" yelled another

man, a bull-whacker from one of the seven big freighters. "We'll soon have enough whites in this show to make it a real fight."

And then, not long afterwards, they were into it, the lines east and west opening up, the old bugle still rolling its notes over the valley, the gunfire licking, Indians beginning to fall back toward the head of the valley, the only way open for them to pull themselves out of the trap closing its great jaws around them. No young chief, however arrogant and smart, was going to stay there and fight an impossible fight that would end in disaster.

"Where's Bill?" Granger was looking for him just before dawn. "It looks like we're gonna have to lay over a day or two to get things sorter patched up so these folks can travel on with us."

"Lay over a week if yuh wanta!" Jackson laughed at him. "There's nigh two hundred wagons now, an' there ain't gonna be no more reds jumpin' us all the way to the Bitter Root."

The wounded had been cared for, and graves were being opened for the sixteen dead inside the circle. Four of them were

women, three were children. Tired men and women lay asleep where they had dropped, not caring about anything now.

And Yancey had found her back there sitting on a wagon tongue, her face weary. At the sight of him she revived, her tired arms suddenly not tired at all as they lifted to him, her lips cool as the dawn as they met his lips. Finally she was able to whisper one question:

"When did you know, Bill?"

"North of Laramie," he whispered back, "when I rose from that wagon tongue and turned—and saw you. Then and there I knew it had to be."

"And then and there," tears sparkled in her eyes, her arms tightening around his neck, "I knew it also. It—it was just something that had to be, Bill."

"Then, darling," he tried to smile, "it looks like Bitter Root has me. A married man has no business bossing wagon trains—"

"But if he thinks he has in the future," she gave him a little shake, "I'll be there beside him always, go wherever he may go..."

THE END

BAPTIZING THE BANDIT

A FEW days ago they held up the main bank in Telluride, Colorado. Now, with posess scouring the rough country for them, they are camped by a shallow little lake in eastern Utah. George LeRoy Parker stands on a sloping rock on the muddy shore, holding Matt Warner's big old needle gun. LeRoy's looking for wild fowl.

That old gun is Matt Warner's pet. He has given it a pet name, too. "Butch" he calls it, because she's a whopper and slaughters anything she hits.

Matt Warner sees Roy Parker stand there on that sloping rock in the oozy muck. Matt gets an idea. Nudging his brother-in-law and owl-hoot-partner, Tom McCarty, Matt whispers something out of a corner of his mouth. Tom McCarty grins and says, "Hell, yes!"

Matt calls out, "Hey, Roy! Bet you a bottle you can't hit that rock there in the middle of the lake."

"Pull out the cork," Roy Parker shouts back, throwing the needle gun to his shoulder, "'cause this one's on you, Matt, old boy!"

He fires, and, of course, hits the rock. But something else happens, too. That big-bore kicks like hell and sends little LeRoy sprawling, smack dab in the muck.

Matt and Tom damn near fall over laughing; they laugh so hard, they can't help Roy Parker who is flopping and floundering in the mud like a stranded catfish. By the time he gets out he is smeared with goo from head to feet. So is the gun.

But Roy Parker can take a joke. He's a sport, Roy is. They get the bottle open and finish it between the three of them. Nor is that all. They decide to call Roy Parker "Butch" from now on, and Roy says, "It's okay by me, boys."

Later on, when the name Parker gets too hot for Butch, he changes it to Cassidy. And that is how come George LeRoy Parker, the one-time cowboy from Circleville, Utah, got the handle of Butch Cassidy.

—Roy Vandergoott

Range-to-Railhead Lifeline

A TRAIL map of the Panhandle section of Texas shows radiating lines like the spokes of a wheel. Each little lightly-traced mark represents a road over which, many years ago, cattle were driven from South Texas to the railheads in Kansas and other Northern States.

Charles Goodnight, pioneer Texas rancher, started a trail up the Pecos River across New Mexico to Colorado and Wyoming. It was used by many cattlemen, among them John Chisum, the man who is credited in songs and stories of that period with having started the Chisholm trail.

There has been considerable confusion over the fact that two men with names alike in sound, but different in spelling, drove cattle from Texas to the Northern markets. One was *C-h-i-s-u-m*—the other was *C-h-i-s-h-o-l-m*.

Before his death some years ago Goodnight set this matter right. According to the rancher, who knew both men, John Chisum followed the Goodnight and Loving trail up the Pecos in 1866, sold his steers in 1867 to government buyers, then returned to his ranch in Texas. Chisum never again drove a herd north and never claimed having done so. He did, however, drive two herds to Little Rock at the close of the Civil War.

Before the War, John Chisholm—in no way related to John Chisum—guided 600 steers from the Texas frontier to old Fort Cobb, near where Oklahoma City is now located. Old-timers say that this was the

origin of the name "Chisholm's Trail," though actually no trail was opened.

Another mistaken impression is that John Chisholm was the first man to open a northern trail, whereas the first herd ever driven out of Northwest Texas was in 1858, and it was directed by Oliver Loving.

Leaving Palo Pinto and Jack counties and moving northward to Red River Crossing, Loving moved on to the Arkansas River near old Fort Tarsh, followed the river up into Colorado to where Pueblo now stands, and continued to the Platte River near Denver, where he sold his herd.

Ranchers and cowboys, especially those who preceded the railroads to the Texas plains, have long argued over the various claims regarding the origin of the Chisholm Trail.

One of them, Captain Speaks, is believed to have cleared up the mystery and determined the trail's true history. Though John Chisholm, trapper, made the trail with his wagon all the way from Oklahoma City to Kansas City, Captain Speaks, following later with a herd of cattle, was the first to utilize and lengthen it. Four cowboys accompanied Speaks on this trip.

The old Chisholm Trail has now become the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad right-of-way through Oklahoma and most of Texas. Over it trod longhorns from Texas and Oklahoma, bound for the Kansas markets and railheads. It was because the trail was so advantageous that the Santa Fe paralleled it from Kansas into

The historic old Chisholm Trail, famed in song and story, and at one time the Highway Number One from the overstocked Texas ranges to end-of-steel, was more than the dusty lifeline of a vast cattle empire. The name of the man who blazed that vital trail has long been shrouded in mystery—a secret of the Old

West.

By Jared R.
Kingsley



Over it trod thousands of
longhorns, bound for the
Kansas markets.

North Texas on its westward route.

Trapper Chisholm had no intention of being a trail-blazer when he left Oklahoma in the Spring of 1866. His wagons were heavy with furs, for the Winter hunting season had been a profitable one.

Chisholm turned north from the Canadian River at a point where Oklahoma City now stands, reached the Santa Fe Trail up in Kansas and followed it into Kansas City.

A few days after Chisholm and his wag-

ons left Oklahoma, Captain Speaks and his cowboys reached the Canadian River crossing with their herd of longhorns. Two Indian guides had led them from the Texas line to that point. Then the stockmen decided to dispense with the guides, since the wagon tracks of the Chisholm party pointed the way so plainly.

Soon after this the Chisholm Trail was recognized as one of the main highways between the Kansas railheads and Texas.



Black Norcross
got in a hurried
shot at Gard.

The gleaming yellow metal that at last rewarded Gard Holden on his Indian Creek claim served as a death warrant, not only for himself, but for every honest miner who swung a pick in that boothill bonanza!

By Lee E. Wells

INDIAN CREEK lay far back in the Pocolotes range, a brawling little stream that plunged out of a deep canyon and hurled itself the length of granite-rimmed Small Valley. Gard Holden's claim was along the narrow strip between the rushing water and the high canyon wall. Others were located down stream and spread out along the valley.

Gard made just enough for his beans and bacon, picking up a few nuggets and some stringers of color. He was still playing his hunch. In the little mining camp Gard was considered either a fool, or a man with a heap of mine savvy. Black Norcross and Montana Pete figured Gard was smart and both men moved close to him.

Gard thought of them as he swung his pick into the hard rock wall of the ravine. Those two did more watching than mining. They constantly prowled up and down the creek, trying to be friendly.

He dropped the pick and began filling the box. The rushing water carried the gravel down stream, the wooden riffles catching the heavy golden sediment. Gard swung the shovel again, checked the swing of it in stunned surprise.

Nuggets instead of flakes were caught. Gard's blue eyes widened and he dropped the shovel. He bent down, scarcely breathing, his tanned thin face intent, wide lips a little open. He picked up the nuggets, rolled them in his wide palm. The flickering excited light in his eyes blazed and he thrust the ore into a poke bag. He attacked the ravine wall with pick and hastily shovelled more gravel into the box.

More nuggets turned up. Gard wanted to shout and kick his long, lean legs into

INDIAN CREEK'S BLOOD-BONANZA

a triumphant dance. Caution held him. Maybe this was only a pocket, quickly played out. But in his mind, three words blazed like rockets—vein, strike, bonanza.

"Howdy, Gard!" a rough voice hailed from down the ravine.

Gard looked up. Montana Pete and Black Norcross toiled up the steep slope toward him. He hastily stepped across the box and went to meet the men.

Black's piggish eyes showed slight surprise. His coarse, round face broke in a loose grin. "Yuh're sure mighty friendly all of a sudden, Gard."

"Maybe he's found something he ain't wanting us to see. Is that it, Gard?"

Gard shook his head and hoped that his excitement didn't show. "The usual color, that's all."

For a moment, Gard thought the two men were going to push past him and examine the box for themselves. They exchanged quick glances and Black rubbed his hand across his bristly chin. Montana pushed his hat back over his copper-red hair.

"We'd better trail on down the creek, Black," he said softly. "Gard sure looks busy."

"Cleaning up enough to get some beans," Gard answered easily.

Black gave the box another long look and then lifted his eyes to the scar on the ravine wall where Gard had been working. His thin lips snapped shut in sudden decision and his eyes went blank. A look of animal cunning swept over his face.

"Nothing important. Just taking a *pasear* down the creek. See yuh later, Gard. Come on, Pete."

Gard watched them go back down the ravine, two hulking men who would bear watching. From their rolling walk, they looked more used to a saddle than a pick and shovel. Gard turned slowly away and returned to his box. He picked up his shovel, cleaned out the box and quit work for the day.

Curious eyes could watch him from the

bushes lining the rim of the ravine and he'd never be the wiser. He went into his one room shack, built the fire in a little round-bellied stove. As soon as he was sure that smoke curled from his chimney, he slipped to the window and peered cautiously out toward the rim.

After ten minutes of waiting, his keen glance shifted to a bush that had moved slightly. There was no wind, the rest of the bushes had not moved. Slowly, Gard's lips set in a thin, angry line. He was being watched; there was no doubt of it.

Until nightfall, he did little. He cooked his meal, cut wood for the stove. At last night blanketed the ravine. Gard hastily shoved his poke of samples into his pocket and loosened the Colt in the holster. He slipped to the little fenced pasture just off the ravine and saddled his horse. Very carefully he picked his way down Indian Creek toward the distant town of Gunsight.

The little crossroads town was almost wholly dark when Gard arrived. Only Ten Rector's general store on the corner showed any activity. Gard dismounted before the hitchrack and sauntered inside. A single glance over the big room with its barrels, boxes, counters and shelves made Gard breathe easier. For the moment there were no customers.

The big storekeeper wheeled around in his chair from his desk. His square face broke in a pleased smile when he saw Gard. Holden dumped the pokes on the counter.

"Rector, I think I've struck something heavy. Can you get these to Repeto for assay, pronto?"

Rector's big hands swept the pokes off the counter, and placed them in the big iron safe. He turned, his black eyes sharp. "You sound worried, Gard."

"Nervous, I reckon. If that assay's what I think it is, I got a claim worth plenty of *dinero*. I'd be fair game for any claim-jumper."

Rector nodded. Gard bought a few supplies and exacted a promise that the sam-

ples would be sent to Repeto right away. Then he left.

As he came through his pasture and started down the winding ravine, a flicker of light in his cabin window brought him up short.

Gard dropped the saddle, tense. He snaked the Colt from leather and slipped forward, hammer dogged back. He was nearly to the cabin when he heard a startled exclamation. A gun blasted and Gard heard the whisper of the slug close to his cheek. Instantly he crouched and whirled. His Colt yammered a reply to the orange flash in the trees.

Bushes crashed. A second figure darted from the door of the cabin. Gard fired, hastily. The man cried out, staggered, and then caught himself. Again red flames spat from the bushes and Gard threw himself flat. The intruder had disappeared. Silence fell on the ravine.

LONG minutes passed. Gard carefully came to his feet and ventured toward his shack. Pulling a burlap sack over the window, he lit the lamp. A single glance told him the place had been ransacked.

"Gard!" A voice hailed faintly from down the ravine.

Gard blew out the lamp and stepped to the door, sixgun in hand. The call came again in a voice that Gard knew as belonging to his neighbor, Lefty Ranson. Gard answered.

"Heard shots. Figured you was in trouble," Ranson said as he came up. Behind him followed several of the miners from along Indian Creek. Gard saw Norcross and Montana Pete among them. Gard shrugged and asked the miners to come into the shack. He lit the lamp again and waved his arm around the torn-up room.

"Robbers or claim-jumpers, I don't know which," he said tightly.

The room seemed crowded with the bearded, broad-chested miners. Ranson's glance circled the room and his deep-lined face showed his dark thoughts. Klag Banton spat disgustfully out the door. Gard's attention centered on Montana Pete. The man wore a leather jacket and he seemed to favor his shoulder. His thin lips seemed pinched together and his eyes avoided Gard's glances.

"It's beginning to look like we need a law brand," Ranson growled. "Anything taken?"

"Not that I know of," Gard replied. He kept his glance shifting from Norcross to Pete. "But the next jasper snooping around is going to land in Boothill."

He wanted to rip the jacket off Montana Pete. Gard was certain, from the way the gunhawk carried his shoulder, that he was one of the prowlers. Gard realized he had only suspicion, that he had little to go on, so he kept quiet and after awhile the miners filed out.

Four days passed without incident. Occasionally Gard saw Ranson or Klag Banton, but Norcross and Montana stayed out of sight. On the fifth day, Gard saddled and rode into Gunsight.

Rector's store was filled with customers, but the big storekeeper shook his head slightly when he caught Gard's glance. He left a customer and threaded among the barrels to the young miner.

"The assay report ain't come through yet," he whispered, quickly. "Something's held it up. But there's a gent at Mrs. Small's rooming house who wants to see you. Name's Nugget Collins, from Repeto."

"Miner?" Gard asked.

"Claim buyer, I'd say," Rector answered. "Nice spoken gent, has money. He might have a deal for you."

Gard thanked Rector and left the store. He walked up the Gunsight road and turned in at Mrs. Small's. The motherly, buxom, gray-haired woman admitted him to the parlor and called up the stairs for Collins. Gard stood at the windows, staring out at the rutted street. He couldn't understand why the assay report had been delayed.

Nugget Collins was a little man with sharp gray eyes, a thin mouth that constantly carried a pinched smile. His voice was a pleasant purr. He shook hands enthusiastically with Gard and practically shoved the larger man into a chair. Nugget spread wide the tails of his black coat and perched on the edge of another chair.

Nugget Collins came directly to the point. "I'm buying claims, Holden," he said, "all along Indian Creek. I'm prepared to give you a good offer, just as I made to Ranson, Norcross, Klag Banton and some others."

"Why buy up here in Gunsight?" Gard asked suspiciously. "None of them pay much."

"I take a chance on that," Collins said airily. "Sometimes I lose, more often I win. Now what's your selling price?"

Gard hesitated, then his chin set in a stubborn line. He'd put too much time and effort into the work. He'd gamble on getting a strike. Collins must have read the refusal in Gard's face before the miner spoke.

"Now don't make a hasty decision," Nugget said swiftly. He smiled and leaned back, placing his thumbs in the pockets of his flowered vest. "I'll give you a real bargain."

The figure he named was definitely surprising. Gard shook his head and arose.

"Thanks, friend. I reckon I'll gamble on my claim. She ain't much but you never can tell."

Collins started to say something, then thought better of it. He shrugged and arose, showing a slight annoyance. "I think you're loco to pass up the deal, Holden."

"I been loco all my life," Gard grinned and started toward the door. "It won't hurt much to be crazy awhile longer. I'm young yet. Adios, Mr. Collins. Thanks for the offer."

"Good day. If you change your mind in the next week let me know. I'll be in Gunsight for awhile."

Gard returned to the store. The crowd had left and Gard told Rector of the offer. The big storekeeper listened gravely, stared out the windows, his black eyes narrowed in thought, big hands clasped loosely together.

"Maybe you were loco, son," he sighed. "But I reckon I'd done the same thing was I in your place. I'm worried about that assay report. It should be here."

"I'll be back in a couple of days," Gard said. "I'm sure anxious to know what I got."

Late that night Gard suddenly snapped awake. He lay tense and silent on the bunk, listening, his hand reaching for the sixgun that rested under his blanket. The sound came again.

"Gard!" It came from down the ravine.

Gard jumped to the window and peered out. Two lanterns bobbed uncertainly up

the ravine toward the shack. He opened the door, calling a challenge into the night.

"It's Klag. And Norcross. Someone's done killed Ranson."

Gard swore and jumped back into the shack. By the time he had lighted the lamp Blanton and Norcross came in the door. Gard reached for his clothing, jamming his hat on his head.

"Ain't heard nothing, have you, Gard?" Blanton asked.

"No. I was asleep. Let's get down to Lefty's."

The man was dead. A forty-four slug had crashed into his chest. He lay sprawled just inside the door of his cabin, an unfired six in his big flaccid hand. Miners from up and down the creek crowded in. Search parties with lanterns tried to find signs, but the killers had been careful. They returned to the cabin.

"Nothing stolen," Gard sighed, "so far as we can tell. I guess there ain't nothing to do but bury Lefty in the morning."

"We need law," Blanton growled.

Black Norcross shrugged his wide, beefy shoulders. "I reckon we miners could take care of things if something like this happened again."

Others growled wrathful assent. They trailed away, back to their claims. All were to return at dawn for the makeshift burial. Gard and Blanton prepared Ranson for burial, wrapping him in a blanket. They kept watch until dawn.

"I don't savvy it," Klag said finally. "None of us makes more than beans and bacon. Ain't been no killing and robbing before. Why now?"

Gard shook his head. He thought he knew the answer, but dared not talk about his strike—not until the assay report had come back, at least.

"Just one more ruckus, and I'm doing something," Blanton said solemnly. "I reckon all of us would sign a petition for law and order was I to write it."

"Maybe you ought to start right now," Gard replied. "I'll be the first to sign her."

"I will," Klag snapped. "I'll start working on her tonight."

AT DAWN, Lefty was laid to rest. The miners parted, going to their claims. Gard went to his cabin and wearily stretched out on his bunk. He slept for

awhile and then, after a cup of hot, strong coffee, returned to his work at the canyon wall. He had worked about an hour when he saw Klag come up the ravine. The man seemed excited.

"A jasper just took over Lefty's claim. Had a bill of sale with Lefty's signature!"

"Collins!" Gard ejaculated.

"That's the handle, Nugget Collins. He says Lefty sold just yesterday and was figuring on moving out this afternoon. You reckon everything's all legal-like?" Klag asked uncertainly.

"You saw the signature?"

Klag nodded. "Yep. Sure looked like Lefty's."

"Collins said you was fixin' to sell. That right?" Gard asked sharply.

"He was talking," Klag replied, "and I listened. I didn't promise anything, but said I sure felt like selling out at times."

Gard sighed. "I guess Ranson might have sold the claim. Lefty isn't going to be able to say one way or the other."

Klag agreed. The gloom lifted a bit. "I got part of that law petition writ, Gard. Sounds right good so far. I'll be here early in the morning for you to sign. Sooner we get it to Gunsight, the better I'm gonna feel." He turned and walked back down the ravine.

The burlap sack was drawn over the window that night before Gard lit the lamp. He buried his pokes and then prepared the evening meal. While he lingered over his coffee he heard sudden shots ring out. They sounded as if they came from the mouth of the ravine and slightly to the east.

Gard sat frozen a moment, ears strained. He pushed from the table and grabbed his hat. Blowing out the lamp he opened the door and listened again. He thought he heard pounding steps coming up the ravine and he stepped clear of the shack. Someone was coming fast.

Gard called out. Instantly the sound of the advance stopped. The seconds stretched into a tense eternity. Gard carefully edged forward, eyes straining into the darkness. His hand clenched the holstered six. His boot struck a tin can and the metal banged loudly. Instantly a gun smashed, a slug hit the shack wall.

Gard fired toward the dot of flame, sending three shots in a swift bracket.

Bushes threshed and boots scrambled hastily away, resounding up the steep side of the ravine.

Gard ran toward the sound, gun poised in his hand. Twigs cracked above him on the rim of the ledge, and another shot smashed downward, but the unseen man fired blindly. Gard answered with another quick shot. The running steps quickly faded and Gard knew the man had escaped from him.

He turned and ran down the ravine toward the mouth. A sharp challenge met him and Gard answered. A band of armed and angry miners surrounded him. They had heard the quick exchange of shots and had come to take a hand. One of the group, Danforth, told Gard the news.

"Klag Banton's pretty bad shot up. I don't reckon he'll live."

The unconscious miner lay on his bunk, pale and barely breathing. Crude bandages had stopped the flow of blood, but Klag needed a doctor—pronto. Young Jim Danforth swore feelingly with a deep shake of hatred in his voice.

"A man ain't safe along Indian Creek no more. It's worth your life to work your claim, or go to bed at night. What are we going to do?"

A chorus of angry growls from the crowding men answered him. Gard turned from the bunk and went to the rickety table. Beneath it, the corner resting in a pool of Klag's blood, was a paper. Gard picked it up, hastily read the scrawled lines. He looked around.

"Here's our answer," he stated flatly. "Most of us on the west side of the creek are here. Let's form a committee and a miners' court. We'll handle our own law and order. I'll finish this petition that Klag started. We'll all sign it."

"Then what?" Norcross demanded. Gard had not noticed him in the room before. "It'll go to Repeto and we won't hear nothing more."

"We will," Gard asserted. "Our miners' committee will work until the law gets here. We'll patrol the claims. Any prowlers will get shot first and questioned later. How about it?"

"Get that paper ready," Danforth snapped. The rest made swift, angry agreement.

They prepared Klag for the journey to

Gunsight and Doc Gifford. By the time a crude stretcher was made and Klag carefully moved into it, Gard had finished the petition. The men crowded around the table, eager to sign. In a short while a slow cavalcade trailed down Indian Creek toward the Gunsight road.

DOC GIFFORD took a single look at the wounded man and his face grew grave. "He's got one chance in ten," he said, "that's all. I'll do my best."

Gard, Danforth and some of the others went to Ten Rector's store. Ten read trouble in the scowling faces and in the petition they handed him. He quickly read it. Without a word he took the paper to his desk and added his own signature.

"I'm taking this personally to Repeto. A heap of things are happening in Gunsight and along Indian Creek, that's not good. For instance, Gard, your shipment ain't come in yet. I'll check on that too. I'll bring every pressure I can to get a regular deputy down here."

"We have a committee that will do until regular law comes in," Gard explained. "Danforth, here, and a couple of others will patrol the Creek."

"Renegades, killers," Rector muttered. "Was a time Gunsight had no trouble. That day will come again. We'll have our badge totter within a week."

Except for Gard, the miners went back to Indian Creek. He asked young Danforth to keep a close watch on the ravine. Early the next morning, Rector left for Repeto riding beside his driver on the seat of the big freight wagon. Gard saw him off with a feeling of relief and then went to Mrs. Small's for breakfast. Nug-

get Collins greeted him in pleased surprise, but his smile soon vanished.

"There's a heap of trouble down this way, seems like," he sighed. "Ranson killed, a good man. I did business with him. Now Klag bad shot up, won't live. I had a long talk with him just a day or two ago."

"You did business with him?" Gard asked.

Nugget smiled enigmatically. "Maybe. Maybe not. Klag can tell you when he recovers."

Nugget Collins busied himself with his food and Gard realized he would get nothing more out of the man. After breakfast, Gard went to Doc Gifford's little office. He kept thinking of Nugget Collins, Black Norcross and Montana Pete.

Young Doc Gifford admitted Gard. His eyes looked like two holes in a blanket and his face was gaunt with weariness and strain. He smiled briefly at Gard and jerked his head toward the back room.

"It was a bad night. Three times I could have sworn Klag would be in Boot-hill by this morning. But he pulled through. Mrs. Rector helped me or I would never have made it."

"He's conscious!" Gard exclaimed. "Who jumped him?"

Gifford shook his head. "No, Klag is asleep. He might not wake up for forty-eight hours or more. But it's sleep, not a coma."

Gard perked his head toward the rear room and Doc nodded, but placed his fingers to his lips. Gard eased open the door. Klag rested on a cot under a window. His face was pale and bloodless, but his chest rose and fell with deep,



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reassuring regularity. Gard closed the door and scratched his head.

"Doc, I'm going to ask you something. It sounds loco but I think it will bring the killers out in the open. Spread the word around Gunsight that Klag has died."

Gifford looked up, surprised. Then his wide lips flattened and he nodded.

"I'll be getting up to Indian Creek. It's there the jaspers will show their hand as soon as you spread the story down here."

"Good hunting," Doc Gifford said wearily.

Gard returned to Indian Creek. Riding up the ravine, he met Danforth. The wiry young man slouched in the saddle, but a Sharp's rifle rested in the scabbard and he wore a heavy gun and belt. Gard felt relief that the patrol had already been started. He halted long enough to pass a word with Danforth.

"If anyone moves in on Klag's claim, come riding for me. Don't start anything."

Danforth nodded and Gard rode on to his own shack. In less than three hours he was hailed. Danforth stood at the lower reaches of the ravine and signalled him to come. Gard dropped his pick and ran to the guard.

"A jasper named Collins moved in on Klag. Showed a bill of sale. Klag's dead, Collins says."

Gard smiled frostily. "Anyone else about?"

"Black Norcross and Montana Pete was being mighty helpful to Collins," Danforth shrugged. "They sure don't work much on their own claim."

Gard turned and saddled his horse. He ordered Danforth to get the miner's committee together and wait at a claim up the Creek. They were to be sure that Collins and his friends didn't see them. Gard started for Gunsight.

Once on the highway he spurred to greater speed. About halfway there he saw Doc Gifford riding fast toward him. The young sawbones pulled up.

"I was riding out for you, Gard. Nugget Collins got mighty busy after I told him Klag died. He showed a bill of sale where he'd bought the claim yesterday. Klag woke up. He didn't sell his claim."

"Doc, you dabbled a noose over some killers. Come along with me."

Gard neck-reined his horse and the two

men rode toward Indian Creek. By a round-about trail, they avoided Klag's claim and the jumpers who occupied it. The miners were waiting for them and more rode in a few minutes later. When they were all assembled, Gard reviewed the killings and attacks of the last few days.

Young Danforth loosened his Colt in the holster. "This has been your party, Gard. I reckon we'll back you the rest of the way. Let's go get us some skunks."

Gard nodded coldly and led the way out of the cabin. The men trailed silently behind him, grim and angry.

BLACK NORCROSS and Montana Pete were talking to Nugget Collins when Gard and the miners came around a bend in the creek. Norcross moved toward his horse swiftly but Pete snapped a short command to him. The two hulking men waited, tense and hard-eyed. Collins became a little pale but controlled himself. He smiled pleasantly as Gard halted before him. The miners spread out in a loose half circle behind him.

"Let's see that bill of sale," Gard asked.

Collins produced the paper. "It's in order, made before poor Klag died."

"Let me see the Ranson bill," Gard demanded coldly. Collins drew back. His eyes darted to the miners and up to Montana Pete.

"I haven't got it."

Gard's six blurred up and lined down. "You got one minute to put that paper in my hand," he snapped.

Collins gulped. Montana Pete had jerked nervously and his hand dropped toward his holster. He froze when he heard the low warning growl in the miners' throats. Collins edged his fingers inside his coat and produced the second paper. He held it to Gard. One glance at the signature was enough.

"Funny thing that Lefty and Klag both wrote alike," Gard snapped. His eyes were cold as ice. "Klag Banton didn't die, Collins. He didn't sell this claim. The prowlers that jumped me didn't get far. I winged one of them. Pete, the boys want to see your shoulder."

Montana saw that he was trapped. He had no chance of escape but the coiled rope on the miner's shoulder clearly showed what was in store for him. His

hand slapped down desperately to his gun, blurred up. Gard half turned and his six exploded.

Montana Pete was blasted backward to the ground. Norcross unsheathed his Colt and Collins started running for the corner of the shack. Norcross got in a hurried shot at Gard. The slug struck high in his left shoulder.

Gard was whirled half around. The miners surged forward with an angry shout. Gard caught himself. He pulled the trigger and felt the six buck back against his palm. Norcross dropped, howling, his hip smashed by the heavy lead.

Collins had nearly reached the corner. Young Danforth brought his rifle to his shoulder. He took a vital second, then pulled the trigger. Collins pitched forward and lay thrashing on the ground. Danforth grinned.

"He won't walk on that leg for awhile."

Montana Pete was dead and the mark of Gard's shooting was on his shoulder, a partially healed wound carefully bandaged. Norcross and Collins would live, Doc Gifford said, and the miners were for stringing them up immediately. Gard submitted to Doc Gifford's patching, arguing between wrenches of pain against the lynching. The two prisoners waited wide eyed and silent until at last Gard made the miners agree to take them to Gunsight.

It was a bristling, angry procession that

streamed into the little village, the two prisoners riding in their midst. Gard instantly saw Rector's big freight wagon and the storekeeper jumped out to the street when he saw the miners. He was excited. The miners halted when Rector raised his big arms.

"Gunsight gets its deputy, whoever we want to appoint. Gard, I reckon I can tell this since every one in Repeto knows it. You got a strike. I hurried back here, for I reckon half the state is rushing to Gunsight. It's a boom."

"A strike!" Gard breathed. His face tightened. "What about the assay?"

Rector pointed to Collins, who cringed a little. "That sidewinder paid to have the report held up while he jumped a few claims. There's a new assayer at Repeto. Gard Holden has struck a vein, gents."

Ten Rector agreed to lock Collins and Norcross in his storeroom until they could be sent to Repeto. Under the big storekeeper's excited urgings, Danforth was named the first deputy sheriff of Gunsight. At last the group broke up. Gard and Rector stood alone on the store porch.

"A good one," Gard said absently. He shook his head dazedly. "Rector, sure I ain't dreaming? Kick me just to make sure."

A moment later he picked himself up from the dust. Rector looked down at him from the porch and chuckled.

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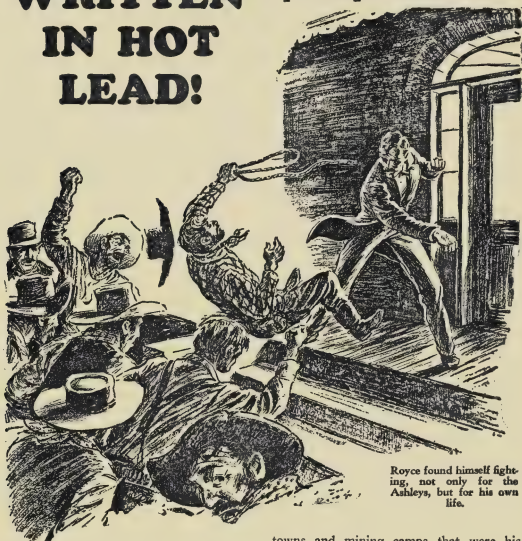
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By Joseph Chadwick



Royce found himself fighting, not only for the Ashleys, but for his own life.

JOHAN ROYCE left the stage at Lode City, when his money ran out. But despite his empty pockets, he had the air and manners of a man of means. Just as a counterfeit coin might be mistaken for the genuine, he easily passed for a gentleman. Men naturally addressed him as "sir."

True, on close inspection his appearance was a bit seedy. His pearl-gray Stetson was a little shabby, his long black broadcloth coat somewhat threadbare. His gray breeches were frayed at pockets and cuffs, and a high polish did not hide the run-down look of his boots. Yet he shamed the boom-

towns and mining camps that were his present habitat.

Now, with the stage pulling out, he stood beside his battered valise and surveyed Lode's main street. It was no different from the main streets of a hundred other Nevada mining towns, and Royce took it in with a jaundiced eye. Lode City was bleak and untidy, with no more character than a grubby tramp. But a boxlike frame building directly opposite caught and held the newcomer's attention.

Its sign read, "Lode City Gazette," and Royce's thin nostrils quivered, as though catching the smell of printer's ink. He was, among other things, a type-setter and press-

Little did John Royce suspect, when he penned that flaming, foreboding editorial, that he might be writing his own obituary! For the tragedy he predicted came to pass before the ink was dry—plunging him into the breach between a kill-mad mob and the girl he loved!

man—a forerunner, in fact, of that odd fraternity, the itinerant printer—the tramp printer of the frontier. He jingled what few coins still remained in his pockets, then, picking up his traveling bag, crossed the street. The door to the newspaper office stood invitingly open.

It was a dingy place, its atmosphere heavy with the mingled smells of ink and benzine and paper. A stooped little man with wispy gray hair stood before a font setting type, and he peered up at the visitor over silver-rimmed spectacles. His eyes asked the question.

"I'd like to see the editor, friend," Royce said. "My name is John Royce, and I've just arrived from Sacramento. I'd like to establish myself here, and if there is any employment open here. . . ."

"You wouldn't be a printer, by any chance?"

"I've had some experience, sir."

The gray little man grunted, still eying Royce with some doubt, but at last he lay down his type stick and came forward. "I'm Ed Marion, the *Gazette's* owner, publisher, editor, et cetera. If you're a printer, you've got a job. Let's see how you do?"

Royce set down his valise, stepped from the "front" to the "shop". He took up the stick, glanced at the copy, reached for type. His eye was slow and his fingers rusty, at first, but after a few minutes Ed Marion, losing his dour expression, grudgingly admitted, "You'll do. You're a printer, all right."

Royce smiled faintly. "A jack-of-all-trades, rather," he said, and removed his coat, unbuttoned a fancy vest, loosened his string tie and the collar of his silk shirt. "But," he added wryly, "master of none."

Ed Marion snorted. "Fancy clothes and fancy talk," he grumbled. "I know your kind. Drifters. Men out of step with the world. Well, here you'll watch your step. The *Gazette* goes to press Fridays. Remember that, *Mister Royce*."

Fussily, he jerked off his apron and

reached for his battered old hat and coat.

"Now that you're here," he said, "I'll take care of my other business."

He went bustling out, and John Royce, sighing with relief, went back to setting type. But his relief was shot through with uneasiness. A job was not everything. Ed Marion's acid-dripping words had hit home. John Royce was a drifter, a man out of step with the world. A ne'er-do-well. And he did not know why.

Long before that first week was out, John Royce was the Lode City *Gazette*. Ed Marion's other business, whatever its nature, seemed to be transacted over saloon bars—and so the newspaper's owner was almost always somewhat tipsy. Royce set up what copy Ed had written up or had clipped from out-of-town—Virginia City, Sacramento and Frisco—papers. He made up and locked the forms; then, needing more copy, he set out to get acquainted with the town.

So even in that first week, even before press day, John Royce's tall and rather distinguished figure became well known to Lode. He made the rounds of every business place—the bank, the stores, the saloons and honkeytonks, the livery barns—and he did not neglect the town marshal's office. He talked to miners and freighters, to prospectors and to newly arrived boomers. He went beyond the edges of Lode, back to the diggings—to the mines and glory holes. His long legs carried him far. And he had a way about him. He could make people talk, and his pockets were always stuffed with notes that would be personal items in the *Gazette*. By Thursday, he unlocked the forms and killed items that had been lifted by Ed Marion from other newspapers. In their place, he put his small stories about Lode and its people.

Late Thursday afternoon, Ed came to the shop in a sour mood. He was sobering up for press day, and, displeased with himself, he prowled about trying to find some fault with Royce's work. He found none.

for the shop had been cleaned up and the flat-bed steam-driven press was ready to roll. Finally he scowled at his printer, and said, testily, "It beats all, why a first rate newspaperman like you should be working on a no-good sheet like the *Gazette*."

Smiling, Royce said, "We'll make it a good paper, Ed."

"What for?" Ed Marion demanded. "It still wouldn't make money."

John Royce didn't answer that, for he knew that Ed Marion would merely scoff if he mentioned that his desire to turn out the best paper possible was a matter of pride. Instead, he said, "How about an editorial, Ed? I left space open for whatever you want to write."

Ed Marion complained that his head ached, and growled, "Write something, yourself, friend. You can do it better than me, anyway."

So Royce sat down at the editor's table and took up a pencil. And his mind was a blank. He sat and thought, and smoked a cheroot. He stared out the office window, which he lately had washed, but he found nothing to write about. Traffic in the street was heavy. Freight and ore wagons were rolling by. A covered Murphy wagon lumbered by, bringing a whole family of boomers. A mule train came and went. A hundred and more men walked by, and a few women. Suddenly John Royce sat erect and leaned forward to stare. "Ed," he said, "who's that—that girl?"

Ed Marion had been dozing in a chair, but now he peered through the window. "The girl in man's clothes?" he asked. "On the pinto pony? Why, that Beth Ashley. Colonel Ashley's daughter. She's his only child, and he owns Lode's biggest mine—the Carolina—a bonanza. They're Virginia folks, by way of Texas. I heard tell that the Colonel won the Carolina in a card game, but I wouldn't swear that he did. . . . See here, now; don't get any notions about that young lady. She's quality folks, and she's already got enough calf-eyed hombies sparking her."

He turned to scowl at his printer, but Royce was no longer paying him any attention. A pencil was flying across paper. John Royce was writing his editorial. It was entitled: What's Wrong With Petticoats?

Friday, the wheezy steam-powered press

rolled. Royce both fired the boiler and fed the sheets of paper onto the revolving cylinder. Ed Marion caught the first copy off the gate and scanned it briefly, then waited for a stack which he carried to a table and began to fold. The first batch was to go to the post office, a part of Manders' General Store, where some would go into the call boxes and others would go out with the mail delivered through the foothills by old Luke Rambler. . . . The next part of the run was handed over to four or five boys who sold them about town. But from the moment the press started, people came into the office to buy their copies. The citizens of Lode were starved for news.

Some two thousand copies were run, and by mid-afternoon all but a few held for the files were gone. When John Royce stopped the press, he felt that the job was well done. He knew that every word of the *Gazette* would be read, including the advertisements. He was pleased because the edition was mostly his own work. But his pleasure quickly faded. Ed Marion had stepped out for a drink, once the run was done, and he came back raging. He was excitedly waving a copy of the paper.

"Royce, you fool!" he ranted. "Have you gone loco?"

"What's wrong, Ed?"

"Wrong? You've ruined me, that's all that's wrong! You've got the whole town laughing over this editorial of yours!" He was shaking with anger, and now he slammed his paper down onto a table. "Poke fun at an Ashley, will you? Why, I ought to fire you—here and now!"

Royce stared at him, not understanding. "What's Wrong With Petticoats?" Ed mimicked. "Listen to this—" He grabbed up the paper again, and read furiously. "This fair town was treated, or mistreated, Thursday past to the horrific sight of the female figure clad in *britches*. Men stared and gaped, and some of Lode's more sedate ladies were patently shocked. Now it is our observation that the male form is quite adaptable to breeches, jeans, pantaloons, or trousers. The anatomy of the male is, in contrast to that of the female of the species. . . ." Again Ed Marion slammed down the paper.

"And so on, sickening!" he yelled. "Why, you rattle-brained dude—don't you realize that you can't publish a thing like that?"

"But it's true, Ed."

"It's libel!" the older man retorted. "There's blamed few women in these parts, and only one of them wears britches—Beth Ashley. Everybody in town knows it, and now you've got folks hee-hawing at a lady—at the daughter of the richest man from one end of Shamrock Grade to the other!"

"I didn't mention the lady by name," Royce said. "I wrote in generalities. I consider it a matter needing reform."

"Reform!" Ed exploded. "You loosed duded-up tramp, nobody reforms rich folks. What they do is their business. Colonel Ashley is the *Gazette's* biggest advertiser—" A look of terror stiffened his face. "Dammit; I'm leaving town until this blows over. I'm taking a holiday—maybe all the way to Frisco. And you, you dude, better shake the dust of this town off you—for good!"

He took to the cubby-hole back room that was his living quarters, and began throwing some clothes into a carpetbag. When he re-appeared, carrying the bag, he flung two ten-dollar gold pieces down on the editorial table. "There's your wages," he muttered. Then he added another ten dollars. "There's your stage fare out of town."

He headed for the door, and John Royce said, "Ed, I have no intention of leaving Lode. I'll get the paper out while you're away."

Ed Marion halted, and faced around. "Friend," he said, less excitedly, "heed my advice. I once saw Colonel Ashley horsewhip a man that insulted his daughter. It wasn't pleasant to see, and it was a lot less pleasant for the man at the wrong end of that buggy whip. Good-bye!"

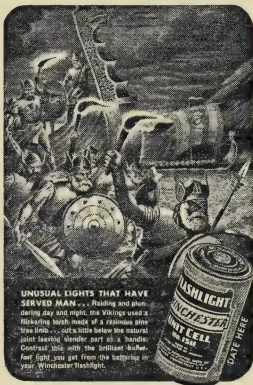
The door slammed. Ed Marion was gone.

THE town talked and laughed about John Royce's editorial—and about Ed Marion's flight—all that afternoon. About sundown, the laughter subsided. But interest did not flag. Somebody brought news from the Carolina Mine that the Ashleys had read the offending editorial. The gossip reported that Colonel Ashley had exploded into a rage. The talk brought men into the street to loiter about in groups, in anticipation of further excitement. They, too, remembered that the mine-owner had

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once horsewhipped a man. John Royce was only vaguely aware that the town expected trouble. He went his way, having supper at the Union House, then stopping in at the Palace Saloon for a drink and a cheroot. He was at the Palace when a man called over the batwings: "Mister Royce, you're wanted at your office."

Royce paid for his drink, walked out leisurely, and headed for the *Gazette* office. His visitor was pacing to and fro before the building, angrily cracking a heavy bullwhip. But it was not Colonel Ashley. Beth Ashley had come to do her own horse-whipping.

Yesterday, Royce had had but a glimpse of her. Now, walking along the street, he had plenty of time to complete his picture of the girl. She was tall and slender, though her shirt and levis revealed decidedly feminine curves, and she had a wealth of tawny blonde hair. Her wide-brimmed, flat-crowned hat hung at her shoulders by its chin cord. Her gray eyes were bright with fury. Her spurs jingled as she strode back and forth along the board sidewalk. John Royce stared, marvelling. Even in anger, Beth Ashley was a beauty.

"Miss Ashley . . . ?"

The girl swung around. A great crowd was watching, from a distance.

Royce removed his hat, bowed, and said, "I am John Royce, and I regret to say that I'm the person who wrote the item that offended you."

"You!" the girl exclaimed. "You brazenly admit it?"

He could only nod, and make haste to apologize. He tried to explain that he had meant no offense, that not for the world would he have hurt so charming a lady. But for once, John Royce lacked words. He stammered and was incoherent, and embarrassment tinted his thin cheeks with red. The truth was, Royce in that moment lost his heart and head to Beth Ashley. And the girl. . . . She too was losing her emotional balance.

The whip was forgotten, and no angry words were flung. The crowd that had come to laugh, to see the dudish newspaperman chastized in public, was disappointed. And old Ed Marion had fled town needlessly.

Finally, John Royce managed to say,

"I'll print an apology in the very next edition, Miss Ashley. A proper apology." But some odd quirk of honesty made him add, "However, I privately prefer ladies in skirts."

A smile touched Beth's lips, lighted her pretty face. "I won't quarrel with you for that, Mr. Royce," she said. "My father feels the same way. He was annoyed by your item, but after his temper subsided he had a hearty laugh. Perhaps you'd like to meet Colonel Ashley . . . ?"

"I'd be honored," murmured Royce.

"Could you accept an invitation to dinner, Sunday?"

"That would give me great pleasure," he said, bowing.

The crowd watched them walk together to the ground-hitched pinto, the girl coiling her long bullwhip and trying to keep it from the man's sight. After watching Royce help Beth Ashley to mount, the crowd turned away with some disgust. It had been a disappointing affair.

* * *

That same night, Royce wrote and set up his apology. Saturday he spent making collections for advertising and soliciting for new accounts. He also visited the bank to attempt to straighten out the *Gazette's* uncertain financial affairs. Later in the day he visited the town's barber for a shave and to have his hair and his rather sleek mustache trimmed. He found a widow woman who took in washing, and asked her to do up his spare shirt. He borrowed from her a flat-iron with which, back in the shop, upon one of the big tables, after locking the front door, he pressed his coat and breeches. Saturday evening, he kept away from the saloons and honkeytonks. He wanted a clear head for Sunday.

Sunday at the big stone house, actually a mansion like those at Virginia City, John Royce found out what it was to live like a bonanza king. The Ashleys lived elegantly, in luxurious surroundings and attended by servants. Colonel Jason Ashley was a tall aristocratic man in his early fifties, and he was as handsome as his daughter was lovely. The dinner was elaborate, appetizing, and served upon fine china and eaten with sterling silver. John Royce knew that not even in San Francisco did people live more elegantly than the Ashleys. And he was certain that he had made a good im-

pression on the Colonel and his daughter.

Afterward, walking home quite late in the evening, he reviewed the visit from all angles, and was satisfied. Ashley had seemed impressed by him, and in the after-dinner conversation his host had listened intently to some of his opinions. There had been but one fault with the dinner. A fourth person had been present—Adam Carstairs, a good-looking and likeable young man who was superintendent of Ashley's Carolina Mine. And Beth had divided her attention between the guests. . . . But, walking back to Lode through the darkness, John Royce was pleased. He liked Lode City, and he was decided that for the first time in his life he would put down roots.

In the week that followed Lode saw how the wind blew, even if Royce himself might not be sure that Beth Ashley found him interesting. The townspeople saw the girl visit the *Gazette* office. They also noted, with lifted eyebrows, that Beth no longer rode a horse man-fashion or wore mannish clothes. Her pinto pony was broken to the side-saddle, and she took to wearing a sedate and fashionable lady's riding habit.

Folks also noted that on Wednesday

evening, Beth and her father chanced to come to the Union House for supper—at the very time when Royce was dining. The Ashleys joined the newspaperman, and it turned out to be a very talkative meal for the three of them. Thursday morning, it was gossiped about, John Royce made his rounds of gathering personal news items with a companion. With Beth Ashley. They traveled by horse and buggy—a livery stable rig. By now, some of Lode's more sporting citizens were betting that John Royce would beat out Adam Carstairs in the race to be Colonel Ashley's son-in-law.

Friday, Royce got out the *Gazette* on his own except for the help of a colored man named Ruck who drifted into Lode in search of a job. Saturday, a letter came from Ed Marion. It arrived by stage from Frisco, and Ed was asking for money. Royce answered the letter in great detail, explaining how things had worked out, and he enclosed a Wells Fargo draft for only enough money to pay Ed's stage fare back to Lode. He wanted Ed Marion back, for he had in mind a partnership deal. Or, if he could swing it, Royce wanted to buy out the *Gazette*. He believed that the Lode Bank would back him financially. It was more than an idea with John Royce.

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Magazine Survey No. 2
"The Man Who Was GI Joe"



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It had become his dream. He wanted something to hold him in the town, where he could be near Beth Ashley.

That second Sunday he had another invitation to the big mansion outside town, but once again Adam Carstairs was present. And for some reason, the young mine superintendent dampened the spirits of both Colonel Ashley and Beth. The colonel and Carstairs had been quarreling before Royce's arrival. When it was time to leave, Carstairs said, "Wait a minute, Royce."

Royce frowned, unable to hide his disappointment. He had hoped to have a few minutes alone with Beth, outside the front door, where it was dark except for moonlight. But he was forced to say, "Glad to have you, sir."

He shook hands with Colonel Ashley, said goodnight to Beth, then departed with Carstairs. It was half a mile from the house to Lode, along a dark and narrow road, and the two men walked half the distance in silence. Finally, Carstairs said, "He's a stubborn, miserly old fool!"

The outburst did not surprise Royce, but the high anger in Carstairs' voice startled him. He said, "You mean Colonel Ashley, of course?"

"I do, dammit!" Carstairs said savagely. "See here, Royce; maybe you can help me. You publish the newspaper, and through it you could stir up public interest—and the citizens may be able to do what I can't do. Somebody's got to make Ashley come to time before there's a disaster."

Royce was all ears. "Explain yourself, Carstairs."

"It's like this," Carstairs said, halting. "Ashley won the Carolina in a card game, a year ago. It was just a hole in the side of Shamrock Grade, then, the diggings of a prospector who didn't believe he would reach high-grade ore. Ashley called me in, because I'm both a geologist and a mining engineer. I saw right away that the signs were right. I put down a shaft, had an assay made, and things looked bright. You see, Royce. . . ."

With an economy of words, young Adam Carstairs explained how Colonel Ashley had organized the Carolina Mining Company. He had rushed to San Francisco to raise working capital. He had gotten hold of some money, but not enough to operate the sort of project the Carolina needed to

be—and the Mine started out on a shoe-string. From the very start, the Carolina required deep shafts and numerous tunnels. The mother lode was elusive. For a time, Ashley had difficulty meeting his payroll.

"There's never been a mine operated on such a small budget," Carstairs said. "It takes timber—a whole forest of it—for a deep hole. It takes stulls and supports, platforms, flooring. You've got to put a fortune into a hole like the Carolina to take out another fortune. . . . Well, Ashley is taking out a fortune but he still hasn't put one into his mine. Royce, that mine is unsafe. Men are working underground with death looking over their shoulders! We've had two cave-ins during the past month, and right now I expect another, bigger one!"

"Because Ashley won't spend money to put in timber?" Royce asked.

Carstairs nodded angrily. "I tried to reason with him today, but he refuses to heed my warnings. The fool is risking the lives of a hundred men, just to save himself a few thousand dollars!" He caught hold of Royce's arm. "You could help me. You're an honest man. What do you say?"

But Royce said, "I need more than your word, Carstairs."

"Proof?" the man said. "Hell; I'll let you see with your own eyes. Come to the Carolina tomorrow, and I'll show you the evidence. You can talk to some of the powdermen, who expect a cave-in every time they set off a blast. Royce, I'll open your eyes!"

"All right," Royce agreed. "I'll be at the Carolina in the morning."

ROYCE kept his word. He arrived at the Carolina early in the morning, and Adam Carstairs was awaiting by the shaft. They went down in the cage, past three levels, to the fourth where men were toiling in the murky hot gloom. They made their way along a rock walled tunnel, and Carstairs pointed out the paucity of the tunnel supports and the weakness of the rock walls and ceilings. But John Royce could have seen the danger, the threat of disaster, with his own eyes. On several occasions in the past, he had toiled as a mucker in mines much like the Carolina. Now he spent most of the day in the gloomy, sweaty depths of Ashley's mine.

He talked to powdermen and muckers. He heard Colonel Jason Ashley cursed as a penny-pinching miser. Later, on reaching the surface, he went to the frame shack that served as the office building. Ashley was there, busily going over his account books. Royce bluntly told him the purpose of his visit to the Carolina.

"I'd like your side of the story, sir," he added.

Ashley was bland. He was a robust man with a mane of gray hair. A carefully trimmed mustache and goatee gave him a distinguished look. His manner was above-board, his smile disarming. "Nonsense," he said. "We've never had any serious accidents here, John. Adam Carstairs sees trouble where none exists."

He rose and came around his desk to lay a hand on Royce's shoulder, in friendly manner. "Beth is quite fond of you," he said. "Just this morning she was saying to me that I should have a man like you with me in the Carolina Mining Company. She's very right, too."

Royce said nothing, but he felt his heart leap.

"I have some mining properties, which I recently acquired, over at Virginia City," Ashley went on. "I need a man to develop them, and I think you're the man, John. I'll double whatever salary you're getting from Ed Marion. Could you leave in a day or two?"

"I could, sir, if Ed gets back."

"He's on his way?"

"I think so."

"Fine!" Ashley exclaimed. "Now you just forget about the *Gazette*. It's no place for a man with your ability, anyway. As soon as Ed gets back, you take the stage to Virginia and look up Lawyer Marks. Now if you'll excuse a busy man. . . ."

Royce found himself eased from the office. It was not until he was halfway back to Lode that he realized he had been offered a bribe.

Ed Marion did not show up. Royce met each daily stage but the *Gazette's* owner was never among the passengers. Twice during the week, as Royce worked toward press day, Colonel Ashley stopped at the office to inquire if Ed had returned. The second time he was impatient, and said, "Now, see here, John; if you won't go to Virginia City, I'll have to send another

man. What's holding you here, anyway?"

Royce merely shook his head, knowing it would be useless to explain to such a man as Ashley that he felt a sense of loyalty to the eccentric Ed Marion—and that it was professional pride that made him bring out the paper on its regular publication day. But Friday came, and Ed Marion was still missing.

Ruck, the colored helper, was firing the boiler. The press would soon roll. Royce was inking up when the shop door opened and Ruck said, "Boss, we've got a visitor—sure 'nough." It was Beth.

Royce left the press and walked toward the girl as he wiped his hands on cotton waste. He saw Beth's somber expression, and he knew instinctively the reason for her coming there. He felt his heart sink, even as he smiled and greeted her. The girl did not return his smile.

"John, I've come to ask you a favor," she said coldly. "Both my father and Adam Carstairs have told me about the item you're printing in today's *Gazette*. It's a vicious thing to do—against a friend. I'm asking you to keep it out of your paper—for my sake." She drew a deep breath, and added, "And for your sake."

"Beth, it's something this town should know," Royce said. "Your father is wrong, and he's got to be made to realize—"

He broke off as he saw fury come into her eyes.

"So you won't do it, even for me?" Beth said. "This silly paper means more to you than my friendship does? Very well, Mister Royce. Hurt me, if you like, but you'll be hurting yourself even more."

Then she was gone, and despair took hold of John Royce. But a moment later, when Ruck called, "Steam's up, Boss," Royce turned to start the press rolling.

* * *

It seemed to John Royce that the devil was at work. No sooner had the *Gazette* reached its readers, to build up a pressure of anger in the town against Colonel Ashley, than Adam Carstairs' worst fears were realized. A powder blast in the Carolina started a cave-in, and thirty miners were trapped in the lowest level. A wild-excitement swept through Lode and along Shamrock Grade, and great throngs of people gathered out at the Carolina. And the devil kept the ball rolling. . . . Far

underground, rescue squads toiled furiously to reach the entombed men. Above ground, men swore and angrily talked about the disaster and the man to blame for it—condemning Colonel Ashley because the *Gazette* already had made him a marked man.

By nightfall, with the trapped men still not reached, the crowd turned into an angry mob. Men talked of a lynching, and such talk was like a spark to a powder-keg. One man got a rope and fashioned its end into a hangman's noose. Others lighted pitch torches, and through the darkness lighted the mob's way to the Ashley mansion—for the colonel had not shown himself at the scene of the disaster. And it seemed to John Royce that the devil laughed. . . . Royce took a man's horse, by force, and out-raced the vengeance-bent mob to the big house.

The Ashleys were at supper when Royce burst into the house, and the colonel rose from his chair and angrily demanded, "Sir, what is the meaning of this?" And Beth said coldly, "Really, Mister Royce, you should know you're not welcome here."

"Ashley, you fool," he raged, "a mob's on its way here to hang you. Clear out while you can. There's be no stopping those people!"

The girl cried out in sudden panic, and Ashley hurried to a window.

"It's true!" Ashley muttered. "They're almost here!"

Royce could hear a rising roar of angry voices, and, stepping to the window, he saw the glow of a dozen torches. There were hundreds of men in that mob. "Clear out," he told Ashley. "Out the back way. Head for your stables, and take horses. Head over the hills and try to reach Virginia City. I'll try to keep the mob off."

He ran through the house and let himself out, and he was none too soon. The vanguard of the lynch-mob was running forward, shouting and cursing. Men took up rocks and flung them at the house. Royce stood on the wide stone steps and shouted, "Hold up, friends! Why take a man's life?"

An angry roar from a hundred throats beat against him. A burly miner shouted, "Out of the way, Royce! We want Ashley!" He came up the steps, brandishing a pick handle. And John Royce found him-

self fighting—fighting not only for time to permit the Ashleys to escape, but for his own life. The mob swarmed at him like maddened beasts.

Royce went down, but he came up again. He dragged a man back who was opening the door. He struck out at a sea of rage-twisted faces, then another blow downed him. He was picked up by rough hands and flung down the steps, and the mob surged over and around him. But he had succeeded in his purpose. A cry rang out, "They're gone. Dammit, Ashley got away!"

Royce lay gasping, full of pain, and the mob, still half-crazed, went through the big house wrecking it. Then suddenly, in the distance, a whistle let out a long, somehow cheerful hoot. It was the steam whistle at the Carolina, sounding the good tidings that the trapped men had been reached. The anger went out of the mob, and a cheer rose. Men started running back toward the mine. Some stopped to help Royce up, saying, "You all right, friend?"

They had no grudge against him. The night's fury had spent itself.

* * *

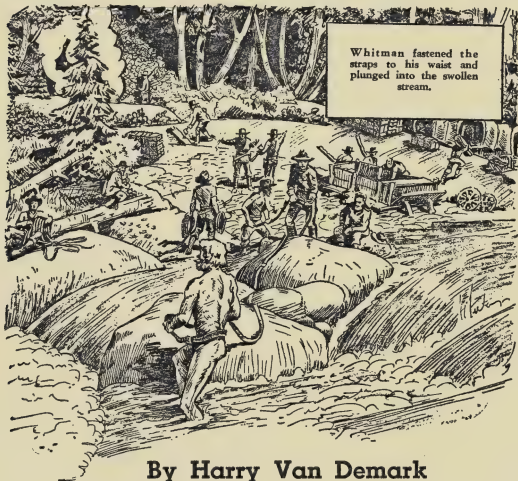
It was another day, and Adam Carstairs, on mailed instructions from his absent employer, was taking safety precautions at the mine out on Shamrock Grade. If he received any letter from Beth Ashley, he did not mention it to John Royce. The newspaperman did not hear from the lady.

The day Ed Marion returned, John Royce met the stage. Shaking hands with his employer, Royce was much the same man who had drifted into Lode with only a few coins in his pockets. He was still rather dudish in his somewhat shabby finery—a gentleman on the surface, a tramp at heart. He was ready to drift.

But Ed said, "John, I brought my daughter along. I've told her about you, and she's mighty anxious to meet you. Kathie, this is. . . ."

John Royce heard no more. He had turned to the Concord coach. He had a glimpse of a modestly lifted skirt, the hem of a petticoat and a slender ankle. And when he lifted his gaze, his face lighted up with a new and very fresh interest. As he reached out to help Kathie Marion descend, John Royce was not sure he would leave Lode, after all.

Bullets Ride the River



By Harry Van Demark

ONE of the bloodiest Indian wars in which the United States engaged was the campaign against the Modocs in the winter of 1872-73 in Oregon. The Indians inflicted defeat after defeat on the government forces virtually without loss to themselves.

It was during one of these engagements that Lieutenant Alexander Boutelle was

placed in command of a wagon train charged with getting through the Indian country with ammunition for the First Cavalry and Twenty-first Infantry under Colonel Frank Wheaton.

At the head of the column rode Lieutenant Boutelle and his second in command, Lieutenant Jeff Nabors. Some miles into Indian territory Boutelle suddenly held up

An army at bay desperately needed those bullets—but the army couldn't get them across the turbulent, hell-bent river. And when the ignorant old teamster plunged into the death-stream, with his foolhardy scheme for getting the ammunition across, it looked as though he was bucking hell-a-mile in a futile attempt to solve the problem in logistics that even the U.S. Army couldn't beat.

his hand for silence. The creaking of axles sounded loud behind them, but far up in front there throbbed another sound.

"They're fighting!" shouted Boutelle. The problem immediately grew more serious. Should they run their wagons up to the battle lines and risk losing them? Or just sit tight and wait for something to happen? Then Boutelle recalled his orders. They were explicit—to bring the ammunition up with all possible speed. He turned to Nabors:

"Order the rearguard to close in and decrease the intervals between your flankers."

Nabors saluted and rode away. As he passed the first wagon a teamster named Tom Whitman shouted at him:

"Say, we ain't goin' up there where all that racket is, are we?"

"You'll go where you're ordered!" Nabors answered curtly.

The wagon-train assumed a more compact form. The members of the cavalry escort closed in on the flanks and at the rear.

Teamster Whitman took his empty pipe from his mouth and gazed into the bowl. "Ain't got any tobaccy, have you?" he called to a cavalryman riding alongside. The trooper shook his head.

Mingled with the distant roar and crackle of the firing came a new sound—a deeper, steadier roar. Lieutenant Boutelle heard it and scowled. "The river's higher!" he muttered.

Spurred by the lieutenant's nervous orders, the column pushed ahead. A trooper from the advance guard came riding back.

"The bridge is gone, sir!" he reported. "There's a signal corps man on the other shore, but we can't read his semaphore."

Boutelle spurred toward the point where a little knot of horsemen had gathered at the edge of the stream. He took a private's carbine, tied a handkerchief to it and wig-wagged with the man on the other bank. Finally he lowered his improvised flag and turned to Nabors. "We're licked if we can't get those wagons across the river. They've been fighting the Modocs for fourteen hours and their ammunition is almost gone."

The men looked at the river. It roared past them, brimming from bank to bank—a hundred and fifty yards wide!

"How about the fords?" Boutelle asked suddenly.

One of the troopers shook his head. "No use, sir. We've been five miles up and five miles down—and there ain't a place even as good as this."

Boutelle pushed his horse to the bank. But the animal refused to enter the water. The signal man on the other bank shouted something unintelligible and sat down. Presently they saw clouds of smoke arising from his pipe.

"That feller over there's got tobaccy!" a voice said nearby.

Boutelle turned to find the lean figure of Teamster Whitman gazing across the stream with the keenest envy.

"Why did you leave your team?" he demanded.

"They can't go very fur, lieutenant," he said with a glance at the river.

"Well, you get back to them, anyway!"

Whitman muttered, "All right—all right," with the air of one seeking to quiet a weeping child. He went back to his horses.

The column, losing all semblance of military discipline, struggled to the edge of the river. Boutelle shouted orders, but the men galloped up and down the bank looking for boats. Boutelle himself tried to find fords in a dozen places. He sent his best swimmers into the water with their horses. In the meantime the teamsters stood about in groups and watched the fruitless efforts of the cavalry. They made no attempt to hide their scorn.

"Want to get across, don't you?" queried Whitman.

BOUTELLE glanced up to find an expression of perfect seriousness on the teamster's face. He made no reply, but Whitman said:

"I can't get them horses and wagons over, but I might manage to get them blue boxes of ca'tridges across."

"All right—take 'em across," Boutelle said suddenly, with an air of washing his hands of the whole business.

Whitman walked back to his own wagon, summoned two other teamsters and commenced to unload the heavy, squat boxes.

Whitman was still giving orders. "Unload two more wagons and bust up the wagon-boxes." The teamsters looked at

him uncertainly but obeyed. He saw them at work, then set two other men splicing together all the halters and piecing out the result with the tugs and lines from the different teams.

Boutelle suddenly found himself taking more interest in what Whitman was doing. Under Whitman's orders the boards from the dismantled wagon-boxes were nailed to the box of his own wagon which he had taken off the wheels and lowered to the ground.

"A boat!" Boutelle exclaimed in astonishment.

In ten minutes the remodeled wagon-box, a clumsy and by no means seaworthy looking craft was at the edge of the water.

"Now," said Whitman, as he stripped off his clothes, "somebody hold my pipe. I ain't goin' to lose that—no sir!"

He stood naked on the bank, then knotted about his waist one end of the rope that had been made from the harness halters.

"Don't nobody go haulin' me back till I give the word," he warned. "I ain't near such a bad swimmer as I look to be." He moved up shore two hundred yards. "When I'm across," he called, "tie that rope to the wagon-box and we'll see." He shivered slightly as he stood looking at the cold, dark water. "I don't like this business none too much, but I can't stand that feller smokin' over there and me with an empty pipe."

With a mighty splash he struck the water. The first rush of the current caught him and he rolled and tumbled down stream, awkwardly striving to get into position to breast the current. The men with the rope started to haul him back.

"Wait—let him go a bit farther," ordered Boutelle.

The current beat the swimmer down swiftly, but he was gaining. Once the men thought he had signaled them to pull him back. But they discovered their mistake when his angry shout of "Don't do that!" came bubbling up from the river.

"Nabors," Boutelle said suddenly. "You can signal that man over there. They can have their ammunition as fast as they can send for it."

Nabors began wig-wagging. When he was through, he said, "Who is this chap who thought up this scheme?"

One of the troopers replied, "His name is Tom Whitman. He used to drive a freight-wagon in Three Rivers, Michigan."

They saw Whitman reach shallow water, stagger a bit, then flounder onto the shore. The signal man bent anxiously over him, then straightened up and started wig-wagging.

"Whitman wants his pipe sent over with the first load!"

Fifteen minutes later the wagon-box tossed and creaked across on its first trip. It reached the other shore half full of water, but the two blue boxes in it were uninjured and Whitman's pipe bobbed on the surface of the water inside the boat.

On the next trip Whitman, still stark naked, but with his pipe going full blast, sat astride one of the boxes and bailed diligently with the nose-bag of one of his horses.

An hour later the men of the First Cavalry and Twenty-fifth Infantry, from their positions in the hills two miles beyond the river, where they had lain for hours, heard rumors that cartridges were on the way.

A little later, men commenced to spill the shining yellow objects out of the blue boxes onto the earth. The Modocs, sensing that something had happened when the fire tripled in volume, withdrew for a consultation with their leader.

Later, in the glow of the sunset, Colonel Wheaton, the commanding officer, approached the camp at the river's edge.

The colonel asked, "Lieutenant, how did you get that ammunition across?"

Boutelle replied, "There's the man who brought it over, sir!"

He indicated Whitman. The colonel looked, arched his eyebrows and dismounted. He went over to where the teamster sat on a box, still puffing contentedly at his pipe.

"Your name?"

Whitman got slowly to his feet.

"Tom Whitman, sir."

"Well, Whitman, I want to thank you publicly, in the name of the army and of your country. It is due chiefly to your heroism that this battle has been won."

Whereupon Whitman removed his pipe, gazed blankly at Colonel Wheaton. "Battle, sir?" he said. "What battle?"

The Gun-Wolves

A Thrilling Range-War Novelette



CHAPTER ONE

Tar-Barrel Justice

BILL GILLIAM was just saddling Pike, his big gray horse, when he heard the pounding of hoof beats. He knew before the rider came in sight that it was a nester. The hoofbeats pounded heavily, like a work horse, unused to running. It was Janey Dunlap.

Bill's heart thumped, and his easy-going, almost lazy manner sloughed off quickly,

as it always did at the sight of the girl. He stepped toward her with a grin; but the grin froze at the sight of Janey's face.

"What is it?" Bill asked anxiously as she slid to the ground.

"It's Johnny!" There was a slight quiver in her voice. "They've got him in town."

Johnny Dunlap, Janey's younger brother, was a hot headed, rash youngster, whose impetuous acts were doing more than any other single thing to cause friction between the ranchers and nesters in Lanham Valley.

"What'd he do this time?" Bill asked.

Ride Tonight!

By James
Shaffer



His hand whipped toward his gun. "Tikeman," he barked, "Damn you—draw!"

Only a desperately driven cowman like Bill Gilliam could make such a madman's gamble to bring red ruin to the range he loved—in the odds-on chance that he might, once and for all, quench the destroying flame with his own life-blood!

"Spit in that old Ed Sutterfield's eye?"

"They accused him of killing Sutterfield beef," she replied and then went on defensively. "Johnny did bring home a quarter of beef one day, but it was only after some of Sutterfield's men chased some cattle through our cornfield. Ruined a lot of it. Johnny said it was only fair payment . . ."

"Never mind," Bill told her gently. "Is he in jail?"

"No, Jack Snead came from town a little while ago. He said that they're getting ready to tar and feather Johnny—and run him out of town on a rail. Bill—they've no right to do that!"

Bill walked over to Pike and stuck his foot in the stirrup. "I'll see what I can do," he said as he settled himself in the saddle. "Don't worry about it." He swung Pike toward Lanham Town and urged him into a high lope.

The old, happy-go-lucky, carefree days of a few years ago seemed like only a dream nowadays, Bill thought, as he rode along. That had been before the nesters had settled in the Valley; before Hess Tikeman had brought the railroad in. And with the railroad had come homesteaders and trouble.

It had been inevitable that Bill and Janey Dunlap should fall in love. Janey's father, Barlow Dunlap, was the acknowledged leader of the homesteaders down on Eggles Creek. And Bill Gilliam had been the spokesman for the ranchers in the Valley. That is, he thought darkly, he had been—until Hess Tikeman had tricked the ranchers into letting the railroad into the Valley.

Bill and Janey had seen a lot of each other; for Bill had many occasions to go over and see Barlow Dunlap. And a spark had seemed to leap to life when the small, pert-nosed, nester's daughter, fresh from the East, and the tall, rangy Westerner had first met.

Pike was blowing hard and covered with lather when Bill rode into Lanham Town. He turned the corner at Schultz's Feed Store and saw the crowd clustered in front of Bailey's Saloon. He hadn't needed to be told who he'd find there; Ed Sutterfield, raspy tongued and bowlegged from his forty years in the saddle; John Bolls, whose JB spread adjoined Bill's Flying G;

Alf Dekker, Larry Moore, and other ranchers of the valley.

And as always, there was smooth faced, suave Hess Tikeman, hanging around the edge of the crowd, prodding and urging them on in his cool, flat monotone. And Luke Potter, Hess' foreman.

Three dusty cowhands had a firm grip on Johnny Dunlap. The nester youth struggled to break free and yelled and cursed at his captors. Somebody was heating a barrel of pitch.

"What the hell's all this, Ed?" Bill Gilliam sang out. The old rancher snapped his head up at Bill's words. There had been a time when the sight of Bill Gilliam would have brought a smile to Sutterfield's face. Now his gray eyes were frosty.

"Curing a sticky-fingered nester of his thieving ways!" Ed Sutterfield snapped, and turned his back. The crowd fell silent, watching Bill. There wasn't a man present that didn't know how Bill felt about Janey Dunlap. And the man they planned to tar and feather was her brother.

Bill slid to the ground, conscious of all eyes on him, and especially conscious of Hess Tikeman's mocking grin. Hess was well away from the crowd, as if he didn't want to soil his tan whipcord pants and his bright blue shirt.

"Sure you ain't being a little hasty about this, Ed?" Bill asked, as he shoved his way through the crowd. Johnny Dunlap's eyes were round with wonder and bright with anger.

"My paw'll git you for this!" he shrilled at Ed Sutterfield. "Us nesters have took enough of a kicking around from you danged cattlemen! Jack Snead rode out to the settlement—every homesteader out there'll come riding into town with their shotguns. They'll blow you to hell!"

"Let 'em come!" Ed Sutterfield rasped. "We'll teach 'em proper respect!"

"Sound like a couple of old women," Bill Gilliam said with a laugh, but there was no humor in the crowd right then. Ed Sutterfield only glared. "Or a couple of kids yelling that my paw kin lick your paw!"

Sutterfield whirled. "You keep out of this, Bill Gilliam!" he rasped. "You been sticking up for them damn nesters ever since you went sweet on that Dunlap filly! Closing your eyes to their thievery, and

arguing that it was all right for them to come here and steal our land. We've had enough of it!" His sweeping gesture included the whole crowd.

"She's ready, Ed." Luke Potter had been stirring the pitch. Now he stepped back from the barrel, letting the black stuff drip from the stick he'd stirred it with. Potter was short and squat, with eyes that sank deep in his forehead. He bared tobacco-stained teeth in a grin at Bill Gilliam, then slid his eyes on over to Hess Tikeman, his boss.

"Git the brushes, boys!" Ed Sutterfield sang out. Johnny Dunlap yelled and jerked convulsively. He broke loose from two of his captors, then twisted around and kicked the remaining man in the shin.

The man cursed and turned Johnny loose. The young homesteader ducked his head and rammed straight ahead. He'd broken through most of the crowd and was getting in the clear, when Luke Potter leaped. The foreman of the Triangle T swung his clubbed gun viciously. The gun crashed down on the boy's skull, and he sprawled limply in the dust.

"One side!" Bill Gilliam growled. He shoved through the crowd and knelt down by the youngster, feeling for a pulse beat. There was a nasty gash along Johnny's skull, but his pulse was strong. Bill got to his feet.

"That was a helluva thing to do," he told Luke Potter. "You could have caved his skull in."

"And who'd be the loser?" Luke Potter grunted. He twirled his gun carelessly and shoved it back in leather. Bill felt the anger rise in him; felt the urge to drive his fist into Luke's leering face.

"Git some water—wake him up!" Ed Sutterfield broke in. "Then hurry up with them brushes. Where's the feathers?"

"Hold up, Ed." There was a cold tone in Bill's voice that made everyone listen.

"I don't aim to be stopped, Bill," the old cowman said, with quiet finality.

Bill Gilliam took a deep breath. He knew the temper of Lanham Valley. The nesters had taken about all they were going to take from the cattlemen. The Valley was hanging on the ragged edge of raw, brutal warfare—that could wipe out the things a man had worked for his whole life; that could fill many graves.

And it wasn't just the natural distrust of rancher and homesteader. It was something more than that. It was as if somebody was planning the trouble; prodding the two factions toward open violence against each other.

"You'll be doing Johnny an injustice," he said quietly. "You'll be punishing him for something he didn't do."

The silence still held the crowd in its grip; it shoved and pressed closer to hear Bill's words. From the corner of his eye, he saw Johnny Dunlap roll over and open his eyes, saw the puzzled look in them as he comprehended what Bill was saying.

"What do you mean, Bill?" Ed Sutterfield asked slowly.

"You know how it is with me and the Dunlaps," Bill went on. He shrugged his shoulders. "That quarter of beef you found over there—I took it over. It was mine."

He'd thought that the hard knot in his guts would loosen when he finally got the words out, but it didn't. It tightened up worse than ever. Ed Sutterfield's face was blank for a moment; then it flushed a dull red.

"I knew you was crazy about that Dunlap filly," Sutterfield blurted, "but I didn't know you'd go so far as to spit out a bald-faced lie about—"

"Hold it, Ed!" Bill's voice rapped out. He dropped his hand to his gun, hating himself for the role he was playing. He and Ed Sutterfield had been among the first to settle this Valley, more than ten years ago. They'd gone through those first bleak years together; helping each other, bolstering each other's nerve to carry on.

"I don't cotton to the name of liar, Ed," he forced the words out.

Ed opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it. He stared straight into Bill's eyes, and Bill wondered if the old man could read the lie in them. He felt uncomfortable; the hand on his gun butt was hot and sweaty. Then Sutterfield shrugged.

"Looks like we've made a mistake," he said, in a tone that belied his words. He looked down at the gaping Johnny Dunlap. "Cut for home, nester!" he rapped out.

Johnny Dunlap got to his feet. He glanced at Bill Gilliam, quizzically, then pushed hurriedly through the crowd and went down the street at a dog trot, without looking back. The crowd stood around,

awkward and silent, then began to drift into Bailey's Saloon. Bill followed with it.

HE FOUND Ed Sutterfield humped over the bar, calloused hand bent around a beer glass. He went down the bar and took his place beside him.

"Bailey! Drinks for the house—on me."

Bailey set the drinks up all along the bar. But no one touched his drink. They were watching old Ed Sutterfield. The old rancher had drained his first glass, but he hadn't reached out to pick up the one Bill had bought.

"Wars have been started for less than that," Bill said quietly, jerking his head toward the barrel of pitch outside the door.

"We've fought before," Ed Sutterfield said coldly, still gripping his empty glass.

"Somehow," Bill said slowly, "I got a feeling this one would be different. This time I got a feeling that we'd lose," he dropped his voice lower, so that his words reached only Sutterfield, "because somebody is *planning* this war. They want it to start, because they're ready for it. And we're not."

"Who in the hell," Ed Sutterfield said loudly, his words dropping like icicles, "would be planning to start a war?"

The crowd shifted uneasily, frowning and waiting. Bill picked up his glass and turned around, hooking his elbows over the bar. His eyes searched the crowd.

"I don't know," he replied. "It would be the man who would stand to make the most money out of such a war."

Hess Tikeman picked up the drink Bill had bought. He tilted the glass slowly and began to pour the drink into the spittoon.

"I think that man," Tikeman said in his cool voice, "would be you, Bill Gilliam."

Something clicked in Bill's mind. It was as if he'd been groping in the dark for something a long time; and then suddenly he had touched it. It was like a flash of light that pierces the gloom and shadows.

Right then he had the answers to a lot of things. He saw the reason for the long list of petty grievances that had been building up in Lanham Valley; that were rubbing men's nerves raw and forcing them into violence.

He jerked himself back to the present,

conscious that Bailey's Saloon was quiet as death; that men were holding their breath, waiting for his move. And he knew that he had to tread very softly. The time wasn't ripe; if he fell for Tikeman's thrust, he'd be playing the other man's game. And you could never beat the other man at his own game.

"Just what do you mean by that, Hess?" He forced his voice into a casual, conversational tone.

The casual tone threw the man off balance for a moment. There was a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes, a flash of annoyance that Bill hadn't risen to the bait.

"Why—wouldn't you profit more than anyone else—if the nesters succeeded in driving the cattlemen out?"

"I still don't get the connection, Hess," Ed Sutterfield broke in. "How the devil could Bill profit by the nesters moving in?"

"You forget that Bill Gilliam is the only man that actually owns his own land," Tikeman said smoothly. "The rest of us," he shrugged, "just use it. If the nesters squeeze us out, Gilliam could *sell* his land. And he took care to buy the best farming land in the Valley."

"I hadn't thought of it thataway," Alf Dekker grunted. "But it makes sense."

"Sure it makes sense," Bill Gilliam said testily. "That's why I urged all of you to buy your own land—when the first nester showed up in the Valley."

"That's right, you did," Ed Sutterfield grunted, and reached for the drink Bill had bought. That action broke the tension. Men relaxed, realizing that there would only be an argument from now on. "But it didn't make sense at the time."

"It did to me," Bill Gilliam went on. "I knew when the railroad came through here, it would mean homesteaders moving in. And the only way to protect your land, then, would be to own it." He turned and faced Hess Tikeman.

"Everybody was against the railroad building through this valley, Hess. They wanted it to go over in Juniper. You were against it too, Hess, until you got the contract to supply the construction gang its beef. Then the railroad got its right-of-way quick!"

Tikeman's face was beet-red. His hand shook as he set his glass back down on the bar. "Anything wrong with a man making

a legitimate profit?" he asked flatly. "Maybe you're just sore you didn't get the contract!"

"Nobody's sore about you making some money," Bill said quietly. "I'm just pointing out the facts. You made a wad of dinero on the railroad moving in. It was easy money, and that kind of money always gives a man ideas that he can keep on making it just as easy."

"I don't like that," Tikeman went on in that flat voice, "you're accusing me in a backhanded sort of way that I'm behind the trouble in the Valley."

"Just pointing out," Bill said quietly, "that you *could* be back of it—the same as me."

Flecks of rage were showing in Tikeman's eyes, and Bill Gilliam waited expectantly, hopefully. It was the first time since he'd known Tikeman that the man had lost his self-control. Bill grinned inwardly—his rawhiding of Tikeman had had the desired effect. A man will blurt things out when he's mad, and that was what Gilliam wanted Tikeman to do. Maybe, he thought, this trouble could be ended right here.

"It didn't sound that way to me," Tikeman said thickly. "It sounded like—"

"Hells bells, you two!" Ed Sutterfield broke in. "We got enough trouble without you two starting a private feud! Bailey, set up another round and we'll—"

"I'll say we got plenty of troubles!" a man broke in excitedly from the front door. "The whole damn nester gang is riding in to town—with guns!"

The cattlemen surged through the batwing doors of the saloon into the street, the argument between Tikeman and Gilliam forgotten. Bill grimaced; he felt he'd been on the point of making Tikeman tip his hand.

The smooth-voiced rancher was planning a war; planning to set the ranchers and nesters at each other's throats, then reap his profits, no matter which side won. Just how he planned to profit, Bill didn't know. He followed the crowd into the street—and then suddenly froze where he stood.

Half a block down the street, the nester wagons had stopped. Barlow Dunlap was in the lead wagon, a shotgun across his knees. The homesteader was leaning over, talking to Johnny Dunlap. The rest of the men were waiting, grim and silent for a

word from Barlow, as to whether to open hostilities—or return home. And Luke Potter's hand had dipped quickly and was raising now—a gun in his fist.

"Potter!"

Bill's voice ripped through all other sounds. The burly foreman hesitated, and that split second gave Gilliam his chance. He dived forward in a flying leap. From the corner of his eye, Potter saw him coming and tried to twist to one side. But he never made it. Bill's hurtling shoulders hit in squarely; the foreman staggered and then sprawled in the street, his gun flying from his fingers.

"What the hell!" Potter bawled in anger. Hess Tikeman started forward angrily, then caught himself and checked his angry stride. Bill turned his back on both men to face the other ranchers squarely.

"It's just what I've been thinking," he rapped out angrily. "Tikeman's the man behind all this—"

He caught the sound of the slight movement behind him; saw Ed Sutterfield's glance slide past him, and flung himself to one side.

Luke Potter's fist caught him a glancing blow over his right ear. It didn't hurt much, but it loosed the hot rage in Bill Gilliam.

He lunged at Potter, catching the man before he could wheel and get set, and drove a vicious right into the man's stomach. Luke Potter snarled an oath and backed away to get his breath. Bill trailed him slowly, caution making him wary. He'd seen Luke Potter fight.

He caught a glimpse of the nesters wheeling their wagons and leaving town, taking Johnny Dunlap with them. And Luke Potter saw the same thing.

"How much bonus would Hess have paid you for firing that shot and starting a range war, Luke?" Bill Gilliam prodded.

"Keep my name out of this, damn you!" Hess Tikeman shouted and started forward.

"It's true!" Bill Gilliam snapped. "You aim to start a war, Hess. You've got some trick up your sleeve."

"You're crazy as hell, Gilliam!" Hess grated. Luke Potter started forward.

"Keep back—this is a fair fight," Ed Sutterfield yelled and blocked the rancher's way. Luke Potter charged.

The man knew every dirty trick in the

book. Bill Gilliam retreated slowly, flicking flesh-cutting blows at Luke's eyes. Potter bored in driving hard blows to Bill's body, trying to get to close quarters where his tricks were most effective. Bill gave ground a little, enough to keep Potter from closing in, and all the time, he kept shooting punches at Potter's face.

There was no cheering; no yelling, no encouragement from the crowd. It was a silent audience, watching a silent fight. And then Luke Potter swung and missed. He bored in, swinging clumsily. Bill retreated, then advanced cautiously. It might be a trick. Luke knew them all.

But it wasn't. Potter swung again, but his aim was way off. He couldn't see clearly. One eye was swollen shut, the other was closing rapidly. Bill Gilliam stepped in then. He chopped short, jolting blows at Luke's face; then plunged recklessly ahead as the man fell back. Two swift jabs at Luke's stomach left the man gasping and helpless, and one looping uppercut made him sag to the dust.

Bill wiped the blood from his face and leaned against the side of Bailey's saloon. He took a deep breath and held it a moment, to calm the heaving of his chest. Then his eyes sought Hess Tikeman.

"Now I'm going to find out something," he rasped. "When Luke wakes up I'm gonna beat the truth out of him—make him tell why he wanted to fire that shot—and start a war!"

He weaved over to the unconscious foreman and started to lift him up. Sutterfield stopped him.

"You licked Luke in a fair fight—let it ride as it is."

"Would you like to know what's behind all this trouble?" Bill demanded. The old man gave him a puzzled look, shrugged.

"I've had enough of your crazy damn talk!" Hess Tikeman said. He drew his gun and leveled it on Bill. "Stay away from Luke."

Bill looked at the gun a moment, then at Tikeman's face, and he read what he wanted to know in the man's eyes.

"All right, Hess," he said softly. "But I'm saying it again—you're trying to start trouble in this Valley. I don't know why, but I aim to find out!"

"Think what you damn please," Hess Tikeman answered coolly, "but poke your

nose into my affairs, and you'll get a bullet in the guts!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Split in the Ranks

BILL pulled Pike to a stop in front of Barlow Dunlap's little sod shanty. The door opened a crack, and the muzzle of a shotgun protruded through. A moment later, Johnny Dunlap's face came into view.

"Put that shotgun down, you young fool!" Bill rasped. He stepped to the ground and wrenched the gun out of the boy's hands. Johnny stared truculently at him as Bill set the shotgun against the door jamb. "Maybe," he said testily, "I shouldn't have stopped them in town, today."

"What's going on?" Barlow Dunlap inquired heavily. The homesteader was coming in from the barn with a pail of milk.

"I want to talk to you, Barlow," Bill told him, and saw the faint hostility flare in Dunlap's eyes.

"I'm thanking you for what you done for Johnny today," he said slowly. "But I ain't bawled Johnny out about killing one of Sutterfield's cows. After what they done to our corn—"

"Did you actually see one of Ed Sutterfield's men drive the cows in your corn?" Bill Gilliam asked coldly.

Barlow Dunlap set the buckets down. "No, I didn't—but we found four, five head in the corn patch—"

Bill sifted tobacco into a brown paper and licked a cigarette shut. When he touched a match to it, he spoke, his voice calmer.

"Barlow, once a range war starts, nothing can stop it, short of one side or the other getting wiped out. And nobody wins except the man that stays out of it."

"Meaning?" Dunlap asked.

"Somebody is trying to start a war in this Valley—and I think I know who it is. Once it starts, it can't be stopped. I'd stake my life that this man wouldn't get in it—either way. Does that make sense?"

"It does—but that don't mean that we're gonna take anything off the cattlemen without striking back," Dunlap argued.

"Would you take Ed Sutterfield's word that he won't start anything?" Bill went on relentlessly. "That if anything happens, it

won't be Sutterfield—or any other rancher's fault?"

The homesteader thought that over a long moment. "I see what you're driving at," he agreed slowly. "Yes, you've got my word on that. Has Sutterfield given his word that neither he nor any of the others will start anything?"

"Not yet," Bill confessed. "But he will, before the night is over." He climbed back into the saddle. "I'll let you know—and after that, I'm counting on you to start no trouble."

Barlow nodded, and Bill rode on home. He fixed supper, did his chores, then saddled a fresh mount and rode over to Ed Sutterfield's. He found Alf Dekker and another rancher there. He wondered idly about their presence, then stated flatly, "I lied to you today—about giving the Dunlaps that beef."

"Figgered you did," Ed Sutterfield said. "Why?"

"Because the Dunlaps were taking payment for a wrong they thought you'd done 'em." He told them about the cows being in the Dunlap corn patch, and of Johnny Dunlap finding tracks of shod horses, showing the cattle had been driven into the patch after the fence was cut. "The Dunlaps didn't know enough about reading sign to follow the trail, or they would have found out that the riders didn't come from your place."

Ed Sutterfield was silent a moment. "All this ties in with what you accused Hess Tikeman of today—trying to start trouble."

"Yeah," Bill replied. "I've been over to see Barlow Dunlap. He agreed to keep the nesters from starting trouble—in case anything else happened. Ed, I'd like to have your promise that you won't deliberately do anything to start trouble. If both sides agree to keep cool heads when something underhanded happens; we can beat Tikeman at his own game."

Ed Sutterfield turned and spat on the ground. "'Fraid I can't give you that promise, Bill."

Bill Gilliam stared at the old rancher a moment, wondering whether to believe his ears or not. "That sounded like you aim to start trouble with the nesters, Ed," he said quietly.

"Maybe it does," Sutterfield grunted.

"Is that all you got to say?" Gilliam de-

manded, frostiness edging into his voice.

"Reckon so," the rancher replied and started to turn back in the house. At that moment a horseman rounded the corner of the barn and pulled up a few feet from Bill. The light from the window splashed on the rider, and Bill noticed with surprise that it was Hess Tikeman.

"Saw Gilliam riding in as I was leaving," Hess said smoothly. "Thought I'd ride back and see what was going on."

"Leaving?" Bill echoed. "You mean you was here before I got here?"

"You might as well know, Bill," Ed Sutterfield broke in harshly. "Us ranchers held a meeting tonight to decide things."

Bill let that sink in slowly. They had decided on a course of action without consulting him; without letting him have a voice in the matter. For the first time in his life, he felt alone—an outcast.

"And what did you decide?"

"That we're giving the nesters their walking papers in the morning," Hess Tikeman replied.

"Thought we agreed not to tell Bill that," Ed Sutterfield said angrily.

"What difference does it make?" Tikeman shrugged. "He'd find it out sooner or later, and," he added slyly, "it might be a good test to find out just where Bill Gilliam stands—with the ranchers, or with the nesters."

The rage that had been building up in Bill Gilliam boiled over. He kned his horse around, his hand whipping down toward his gun.

"Tikeman! Damn you, draw—"

"Hold it, Bill!" Ed Sutterfield's voice cracked. The old cattleman's gun had leaped into his hand. Bill Gilliam stared at him a moment, jaw sagging. And all of a sudden he felt cold, like a man who's been driven into a storm, and shut away from a warm fire. He was barely conscious of Hess Tikeman's laugh as the rancher wheeled his horse and rode off.

"You—you pulled a gun on me, Ed?" Bill mumbled unbelievably. "How come?"

"How come!" Sutterfield snorted. "Today you took up for a thieving nester—and tonight you admitted that you lied to save him! Reckon that about killed whatever faith I had in you, Bill. That's how come!"

"Tikeman was the one that suggested chasing the nesters out in the morning—is

that right? You're listening to Tikeman now—instead of me—is that right?"

"Maybe we are," Sutterfield admitted harshly. "At least Hess is a rancher—and he don't lie to save no thieving nester!"

"I reckon that's clear enough," Bill said slowly and wheeled his horse.

The ride home that night was a nightmare. Bleak thoughts roiled in Bill's mind, and not one of them brought any comfort. He had gambled on trying to keep peace in the Valley, and he'd lost. He'd stooped low enough to lie, to try and avoid bloodshed, and the lie had come back to mock and ruin him.

Tikeman would have his way. In the morning when the ranchers rode over to give the homesteaders their orders, there would be violence. But Hess Tikeman wouldn't be in that violence. Tikeman would be on the fringe of the crowd as he always was, urging and prodding, but careful to stay on the fringe. Tikeman wouldn't care which side won, just so both sides exhausted themselves. Then a strong man, who had stayed out of the fight, could step in and take over.

And after that? Bill cast his mind in the future. With Tikeman running Lanham Valley, how long would he, Bill Gilliam, last? He smiled grimly. Just long enough for Tikeman to force him to fight or pull up stakes and leave.

The thought of leaving the Valley brought a chill to his heart; this had been home for the last ten years. Ten years of hard work, building up his spread, watching its slow growth from a few scraggly cow critters and a sod shanty, to the neat, well-stocked little ranch he had today.

If Tikeman's plans carried through, he'd have that to do all over again, provided he got out of Lanham Valley alive. And if that fight started in the morning. . . .

He pulled his mount to a stop as a sudden thought struck him. Tikeman was counting on trouble in the morning. . . . And suddenly, Bill Gilliam knew what he had to do. . . .

An hour later, he pulled up in front of the Dunlap house. Janey opened the door.

"Bill, what're you doing riding around at this hour? It's almost bedtime."

"Got to see your dad," he said shortly, and walked past her into the kitchen, where Barlow Dunlap rose as he entered.

"You saw Ed Sutterfield, eh?" Dunlap asked. "And he agreed to try and stop the trouble?"

"In a way, yes," Bill hedged. Then he blurted, "Barlow, we got to collect every gun in the settlement tonight!"

"Shucks, that ain't necessary," Dunlap said. "As a matter of fact, it would cause some arguing. I don't think that's a good idea."

"I do," Bill Gilliam said grimly. Janey had come into the kitchen and was looking at him in a puzzled way. "We'll collect 'em—now!"

"What's the matter?" Janey asked angrily. "Isn't a nester's word good enough for you? If we give our word that we won't start trouble—don't you believe us?"

"I'm sorry," Bill said stiffly, "but it's gotta be this way. Barlow, you'll go around with me and see that I get every gun."

"He will *not*!" Janey flared. "It's one thing to give your word to keep peace—and another thing to give up your guns to make sure we keep our word."

"Let's go, Barlow," Bill said coldly.

"Dad, don't do it!" the girl cried. Suddenly she darted toward the corner of the kitchen, where the shotgun stood in a corner. Bill saw the movement and leaped. He wrenched the scattergun from her grasp and shoved the girl roughly into the bedroom. He jammed a chair under the door latch, and then turned to the elder Dunlap.

"Let's go," he intoned. The sixgun in his hand underlined his words.

Dunlap got to his feet. "They say, 'Once a cattleman—always a cattleman,'" he muttered angrily. "I should have known better than put any trust in you. It was all a game, wasn't it? You were to work your way into our confidence—so we'd believe you—after that, it would be easy."

"Get going, Barlow," Bill said again, flourishing his gun. "Hitch up your wagon—we'll drive past each house and collect the guns before any one knows what we're up to."

CHAPTER THREE

The Ranchers Score

GRAY dawn was streaking across the sky when Bill and Barlow Dunlap drove the wagon into Bill's ranch yard.

"There's a cellar under my house," Bill said, "and the door has a lock. We'll put the guns down there."

"And then what?" Dunlap demanded acidly.

"We go back to the homesteader settlement," Bill told him.

Dunlap laughed, "You'll be as welcome back there as a rattlesnake. How long do you think you can live in this Valley—after what you've done?"

"I aim to keep on living in this Valley—that's why I'm doing this," Bill answered tersely.

"You've got a funny way of making neighbors," Dunlap answered bitterly, and picked up the first armload of guns.

They left the wagon at Bill's ranch and saddled a horse for Dunlap for the trip back to the nester settlement. As they topped a rise overlooking Egges Creek, a band of horsemen approached from the direction of town. Barlow Dunlap's jaw set grimly at the sight of them, but he was silent as they trotted into the settlement.

The homesteaders were gathering around Dunlap's house as they rode in, and Bill avoided looking at their faces; he turned his gaze instead to stare at the oncoming horsemen.

The ranchers approached the settlement warily, each rider carrying a Winchester across his saddle. Dunlap swung to the ground and talked in low tones with the homesteaders. Bill's ears burned at what he knew they were saying; then he shut such thoughts out of his mind, as the ranchers came within earshot.

"Just what we figured, boys!" Luke Potter's jeering voice reached him. "Told you we'd find Gilliam over here with his friends this morning."

Ed Sutterfield's face was a cold mask as he rode up. His glance slid over Bill contemptuously, and then came to rest on Barlow Dunlap. Bill's eyes shuttled over the ranchers; he felt their hatred, their contempt for the traitor. Then his eyes fell on Hess Tikeman.

Hess was well back in the crowd, as usual. There would be a number of men between him and the nesters' guns when the firing started. Bill's eyes locked with Tikeman's, and he read the cunning triumph in them. Then Ed Sutterfield's voice cracked the silence.

"Us ranchers held a meeting," he told Barlow Dunlap flatly. "This Valley ain't big enough to hold both nesters and ranchers."

The nesters were silent. Even though they'd been expecting something like this, the actual words were like a blow in the stomach. They stood silent, staring stolidly at Ed Sutterfield. Bill's eyes had shuttled back to Tikeman. The rancher was standing up in his stirrups, his eyes glittering as he watched for the first hostile move from the homesteaders.

"We're giving you a week to pack up and leave," Ed Sutterfield finished in a hushed voice.

Bill Gilliam could hear the quick intake of breath, as the ranchers prepared for the explosion of violence. Saddle leather creaked as men shifted, and hands gripped rifle butts. Ed Sutterfield had finished speaking, and had half swung his rifle up. Now he paused, a puzzled look on his face.

"You heard me, didn't you?"

"We heard you," Barlow Dunlap replied in a strangled voice. He turned and faced Bill Gilliam. "You dirty, double-crossing skunk!" His voice was low and intense with rage. "Get out of my sight—before I choke you with my bare hands!"

Bill Gilliam touched spur to his horse and walked the animal slowly toward the cattlemen. He rode around the group and pulled up alongside Hess Tikeman. The rancher's face was blank with surprise at the inactivity of the nesters, the look deepened and became tinged with baffled anger at Barlow Dunlap's next words.

"We'll be leaving, Sutterfield. Hell, we can't do anything else!"

"Reckon that settles it, boys!" Ed Sutterfield yelled cheerfully.

"And no trouble, either," another rancher said in a relieved tone. "If they're willing to go peaceful like, I'm willing to let 'em."

"Me, too," Alf Dekker said with a sigh.

"They looked like they knew what we come over for, and was all ready to pull out anyhow."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Hess Tikeman cut in quickly. "There's something funny about all this. Those nesters wouldn't give up that easy."

"What you mean, Hess?" a rancher asked. "Them nesters are plumb peaceful. They ain't made a crooked move."

"That's what I don't like about it," Tike-man snapped. "They're too *damn* peaceful!"

"Yeah," Bill Gilliam put in quietly. "This ain't the way you planned it, is it, Hess? There's got to be trouble somewhere along the line before your plan can work, whatever it is."

Tikeman's face turned white with rage. "I've taken enough of your lip, Gilliam!" he snarled. "I'm warning you to stay out of my way!"

"But you're not doing anything about shutting me up, Hess," Bill went on, "and I know the reason. It ain't in you to fight your own fight. You're prodding somebody else into a fight while you stay clear of it yourself. Now, reach for your cutter, if you don't like my lip!"

"Damned if you ain't turned into a sore-head, Gilliam!" Ed Sutterfield rapped out. "Since we been listening to Hess instead of you, you're trying to push him into a gun-fight. It's sickening!"

That was the cue Hess Tikeman needed to get out of the corner Bill had put him in. He grinned at the other ranchers, a flicker of triumph in his eyes.

"C'mon, boys, we've done all we need to here." He led the bunch away. "But I'm telling you," his voice floated back to Gilliam, "those nesters are up to something sneaky. It ain't like them to give up—"

Bill Gilliam turned back to the nesters, a frown of worry on his face. He saw Barlow Dunlap climb into the saddle and start to ride off. He hailed him, and the old nester turned in the saddle.

"I'm going over to your place and get our guns," he told Bill coldly. "We're gonna fight. You can stop me—if you got the guts to shoot an unarmed man."

Bill felt the temper of the homesteaders that had crowded around his horse. To try and stop Dunlap, he'd have to ride some of them down, and he knew Dunlap meant what he said. The only way to stop him was to shoot him.

Then he remembered Hess Tikeman's veiled hints about the nesters playing a sneaky trick; and his warning that the nesters had something up their sleeves. For the nesters to get their guns and start trouble, was just what Tikeman wanted. He frowned, then dug into his hip pocket.

"Sure, go ahead and get the guns, Bar-

low," he said easily, "but before you do, I'd like to give you something. Wait'll I write it out."

He drew a notebook and pencil stub from his pocket. Curiosity held the homesteader a moment while Bill scribbled, then ripped out the notebook page.

"This'll stand up in any court in the country," he said with a grin, holding the paper out to Dunlap. The homesteader hesitated, then reached over for the sheet. His eyes opened in astonishment as he read it.

"A bill of sale made out to me for your ranch!" he muttered. "What does this mean?" Quick suspicion flared in his eyes. "What kinda damn trick you up to now, Gilliam?"

"There's nothing wrong with that bill of sale, is there?" Bill demanded. Dunlap examined it again and shook his head. "Then put it in your pocket. That's proof that I ain't trying no sneaky tricks on you." He waited a moment for that to sink in, then turned to the farmers around him.

"I was watching Tikeman a minute ago—and I'll swear that he was disappointed when the fight didn't start!" he said.

"I kinda noticed that, too," a homesteader put in hesitantly. "But—hell! why would a man want to start a regular war? It—it ain't human!"

"People get killed in a range war," Bill went on, "and if a man stays out of the fight or just hangs around the edge of it, he can seize a dead man's spread, rustle the stock and take over the range. And who could stop him?"

"Granted that all that's true," Dunlap broke in. "What are we gonna do about it?"

"Drive every horse you homesteaders own back into the hills!"

A chorus of angry shouts greeted that proposal. Bill waited grimly for the furor to die down, then went on.

"Send a couple of men along with them, and drive 'em over ground that will leave a plain trail!"

"You've gone crazy!" Dunlap shouted. "First you took our guns—and now you want to drive our horses off!"

"How about that bill of sale you've got in your pocket?" Bill reminded him gently. "My ranch is worth four or five times as much as all your horses put together. You can sell the place and replace every horse!"

There was dead silence after that, until a homesteader said quietly, "It don't make sense, but as long as Dunlap has that bill of sale in his pocket, I'm willing."

"Sure it don't make sense," Bill Gilliam agreed cheerfully. "It don't make sense to nobody but me and Hess Tikeman. And you'll find out why tomorrow morning—or I miss my guess!"

That phrase hung in his mind the rest of that day and that night. If he did miss his guess, he might as well pack up and leave the Valley.

Then he shook such thoughts from his mind. He was guessing on how Hess Tikeman would react to the homesteaders' peaceful submission to leave. And if he guessed the man's reaction correctly—

But as night drew on, he began to have misgivings. After all, he reminded himself, his whole case against Hess Tikeman had been built up only in his mind. There was not one tangible piece of evidence; not one cold, hard fact, to prove that Hess Tikeman was actually behind the trouble.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sixgun Justice

HE SPENT the night in the Dunlap barn. The nesters' horses were back in the hills, and the guns were still in his cellar, and the trap door locked. He finally

fell into a troubled, restless sleep. . . .

He was jerked out of it by the blasting roar of a sixgun. He clawed his way up out of the hay; fumbled for the ladder and almost fell down it to the barn floor.

"Put the torch to everything in sight!" Sutterfield's voice roared out. The Dunlap farm was full of milling horsemen, each carrying a torch. A man galloped toward the barn, then pulled up short at the sight of Bill.

"Drop it, or I'll pull trigger!" Bill Gilliam rasped. The man dropped the torch hastily. "Now yell at Sutterfield," Bill ordered him.

"Ed! Ed!" the man bawled. "It's that crazy Bill Gilliam! The damn fool's got a gun in my guts!" The man backed off.

Sutterfield came galloping over. It was almost broad daylight, and Bill could see that Sutterfield's face was black and scorched as if he'd been fighting fire. The old rancher held a torch in one hand and a sixgun in the other. He slowed down at the sight of Bill's gun trained on the man in front of him.

"Uncock that shooter and stick it in your belt!" Bill ordered, "or I'll kill this man."

Sutterfield cursed, but did as he was told. Other riders were coming in now to see what was going on, each careful to keep his hand from his gun.

"Now we'll palaver," Bill said easily. He grinned at Ed Sutterfield. "Looks like you

THE THIRTEENTH GALLOW'S STEP!

Because of a doomed renegade's lie, young Steve Doyle was spared to serve as undertaker for his five strangled saddlemates, using gallow steps for headboards. . . . But the thirteenth step he carried back to Trail City—a grisly tombstone for the damned that needed upon it only a bullet-written epitaph, and beneath it—the hooded head of the night-riding Vigilantes' boss killer!

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all have been fighting a hell of a big fire."

"You oughta know—you thieving nester-lover!" Sutterfield choked. "Them friends of yours tried to burn us out last night."

"Stampeded my herd of prize Herefords!" Alf Dekker butted in. "Lost about twenty head of prime stuff. Don't think you're gonna stop us this time, Gilliam!"

"Where's Tikeman?" Bill asked.

"Starting that damn fool talk again!" Sutterfield said disgustedly.

"Where is he?" Bill's voice rapped out like gunshots. Sutterfield blinked, then jerked his thumb. "Him and a few others rode down the crick. Here they come!"

Bill Gilliam waited in stony silence as the riders joined the others. Hess Tikeman, Luke Potter and two other men came galloping up.

"What's the matt—oh, it's that crazy Gilliam," Luke Potter snorted.

"Crazy like a fox," Bill cut in smoothly. He saw Barlow Dunlap and some other nesters running toward them, and he grinned up at Sutterfield. "Somebody tried to burn you out last night, huh, Ed? And you, Alf? They stampeded your prize herd. It would take men on horseback to do those jobs."

He paused and then shoved his gun slowly back into its holster. He folded his arms and rocked back on his heels, grinning broadly.

"You boys can go on being suckers as long as you want to, as far as I give a damn," he stated, his voice raspy with contempt, "but I can prove that not a single nester was on horseback last night—because they didn't have a single horse among the lot of them!"

In the silence that greeted this statement, Ed Sutterfield stared at Bill with his mouth agape. He worked his lips but no words came out. He just stared as though he'd seen a ghost.

Barlow Dunlap came running up, with a couple of other homesteaders. "What's all this?" he blustered. "Gilliam! If you've played another dirty trick on us, so help me—"

"He didn't play any dirty trick on you." Ed Sutterfield spoke like a man in a dream.

Bill sighed. He felt as if someone had just lifted a heavy weight from his shoulders. He no longer had that lonesome feel-

ing of an outcast. There was still a job to be done.

"Hess," he said quietly, "suppose we ride over to your place and see if we can find some tired horses, horses that was rode like hell last night!"

He got no further. Luke Potter snarled a curse and drew. But Ed Sutterfield giggled his horse sharply and slammed into the foreman's mount. Potter's first shot sang past Bill's ear, and he didn't get a second one. Gilliam's first slug doubled the foreman over the saddlehorn.

"Drop it, Hess!" Sutterfield's voice barked out. But Hess Tikeman had finally decided to fight. He screamed curses at Bill as he flung his gun up and pulled the trigger.

Bill fell sideways, and felt the slug rip along his shoulder, then his own gun was blasting, and he was watching his lead jerk Tikeman out of the saddle. . . .

An hour later, Ed Sutterfield built a small fire and tossed some papers into it. They'd taken the papers from Hess Tikeman's strong box at his ranch, and Luke Potter had lived long enough to explain them.

"Forged notes against my ranch, Alf Dekker, and four or five other ranchers," Ed Sutterfield muttered.

"I knew Tikeman wanted the shooting to start—but I couldn't figure out why," Bill Gilliam said. "But Luke cleared that up. The minute the shooting started, he and Hess could murder you men in cold blood and blame it on the nesters."

"And then Hess would produce the forged notes, and our places would fall into his hands like ripe plums." Ed Sutterfield shuddered.

He broke off and looked at Bill, his seamed face red with embarrassment. "Reckon I gotta lot of apologizing to do . . . dunno just how to begin to go about it—"

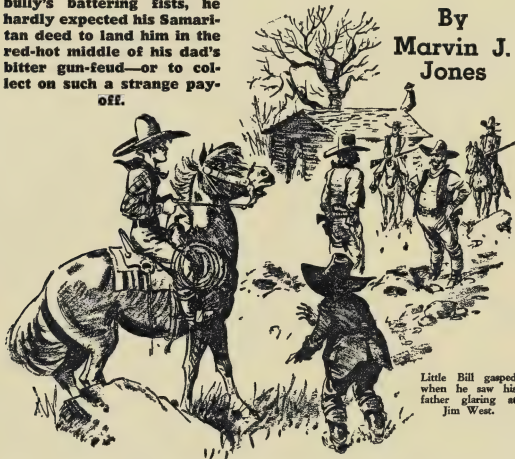
Bill Gilliam laughed. He took a folded sheet of notebook paper from his pocket and dropped it in the fire. It was the bill of sale for his ranch that Barlow Dunlap had returned to him.

"The only way in the world you can make it up to me, is to be my best man at my wedding, and throw the bride and groom a big barbecue afterwards!"

Little Bill--Feud-Buster!

When Little Bill saved the ragged nester's kid from a bully's battering fists, he hardly expected his Samaritan deed to land him in the red-hot middle of his dad's bitter gun-feud—or to collect on such a strange payoff.

By
Marvin J.
Jones



Little Bill gasped when he saw his father glaring at Jim West.

LITTLE BILL stood under the shade of the awning, in front of Al's Barber Shop and looked pretty glum. It was mid-afternoon, hot, dusty and dull. He eyed the lazily swinging batwings of the Puncher's Roost and sighed. Old Charley's bent and bowed form had just shambled through and disappeared. Little Bill had wanted to go in with him, but Old Charley was afraid of what Big Bill would say if he found out.

A commotion of some sort seemed to be developing down in front of Hank McCarty's General Store. Little Bill hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his levis and sauntered down that way. Mostly because he caught sight of Tubb Miller, the

saloon owner's son, standing head and shoulders above a gang of kids. Tubb had gotten his nickname before he shot up like a weed and got to be a gangling, loud-mouthed bully, instead of a short, fat one.

When Little Bill got close, he could see what was going on. As usual, Tubb had his gang of town kids in tow and they were deviling a slender boy in a battered old hat—some homesteader's kid. The nester boy was trying to tie a sack of supplies to the horn of a dilapidated, old wooden saddle. The saddle was on a heavy limbed work horse.

The town kids were throwing rocks at the horse and it was shying. The nester boy was trying to get the horse to quiet

down. He didn't know what was wrong, because the rock throwers were on the other side. And Little Bill couldn't figure out how the kid could see, anyway, with the oversized hat crammed down over his ears.

Tubb Miller cut loose with a fast rock to the horse's flank and the horse reared and tore loose from the hitchrail. He came tearing down the street, with the whites of his eyes showing. Little Bill made a flying leap from the board walk, as the horse came by at a clumsy gallop, and snagged on to the bridle. It wasn't any trick at all to bring the old nag to a halt.

Little Bill led the horse back up the street, swaggering a little. He didn't have any use for nesters, but he figured they were a little better than the town gang. He'd kind of expected the nester kid to be tearing after the runaway horse, but instead, the boy was spraddled out in front of Tubb Miller. The kid had plenty of nerve, or he'd never have challenged Tubb like he was doing. He was white as a sheet and trembling all over, but he had his chin out.

"You big coward!" the kid screamed at Tubb. "I oughta poke you in the nose!"

Little Bill had to grin at that, because Tubb was half again as big as the nester kid. Tubb Miller grinned too. He swaggered forward and stuck his face out.

"If you think you're big enough, go ahead," he taunted.

Then, Little Bill's eyes bulged. The slender kid lashed out with one skinny arm and popped Tubb right where he'd threatened. There wasn't a lot of steam in the punch, but Tubb squawked and staggered back. Blood ran out of his nose. He stood there gaping at the nester kid for a little, then jumped in snarling like a lobo and knocked the slender boy flat on the ground.

The nester kid sat in the street, shaking his head, and then got up. He staggered around until his eyes focused on Tubb and then flew in like a windmill. Tubb knocked him sprawling again, and this time gave the kid a kick when he was slow to get up.

"Get up!" Tubb yelled gleefully, "I got some more for you, you damned little grubber!"

It made Little Bill kind of mad. The nester boy was spunky enough, but he just wasn't any match for Tubb. Little Bill stepped in.

"Leave him alone, Tubb," he said. "He's licked."

"The hell I am!" the big hatted kid said. He stumbled to his feet again. Tears were running out of his eyes, but he wasn't crying. Little Bill gave him a push out of the way when Tubb came lunging in and the kid was so groggy he fell down.

"He's licked," Little Bill told Tubb. "He just don't know it."

"Git outa my way," Tubb snarled and made a swing for Little Bill's jaw. He'd licked Little Bill the year before and figured he could do it again.

Little Bill stepped back. He wasn't as tall or as heavy as Tubb. Windy Dalton, one of the Double B hands, had given Little Bill some boxing lessons, though, since he'd gotten his last licking and Little Bill was anxious to see how they'd work out. When Tubb rushed him again, Little Bill shot out a straight left. He was just as surprised as Tubb, when it landed, and he followed up with a right a little late. Tubb caught him with a roundhouse left and knocked him flying.

Tubb rushed in and tried a kick as Little Bill was scrambling to his feet. Little Bill caught the foot and tipped Tubb over on the back of his head. They were both a little groggy, now. Tubb took a second to get his bearings and then piled in again. Little Bill stabbed out the left. This time, when it smacked home, Little Bill shoved his left foot forward and swung his right shoulder around, with his right fist traveling in front of it.

When it landed, Tubb Miller just groaned, and that was all. His eyes rolled up, he kind of stiffened, and then toppled over sideways. He didn't move a muscle after he hit the ground. All the kids gaped down at him and then took to their heels, screaming that he'd killed Tubb Miller. Little Bill wondered if he really had. His arm tingled clear up to his shoulder.

Tubb wasn't dead though. He rolled over, groaned, and then got to his feet. He went staggering down the street, holding his head in both hands. His face was awfully white, with maybe a touch of green around the edges.

The nester kid was staring at Little Bill, with awe in his eyes.

"Holy cow! What a punch!" he exclaimed.

It made Little Bill embarrassed, having the kid look at him with his eyes shining, like he was some kind of a god or something.

"How old are you?" Little Bill asked gruffly.

"Thirteen," said the kid.

"What you need is some work to fill you out," Little Bill said. He couldn't help swagger a little.

"I *do* work!" the kid protested. He showed Little Bill his hands. They were calloused all right, but they were as slender as a girl's.

"I mean—," Little Bill started to say and then stopped. He'd been about to add, "honest work," but after the game fight the kid had put up, he didn't want to give him a hard time. "Then you don't eat enough," he told the kid gruffly. "You're too skinny."

"I eat what I can get!" the kid said, so fiercely that Little Bill was startled. The slender boy's eyes were fairly blazing, but when Little Bill stared at him, tears began to form in them and he turned away.

Little Bill felt sorry saying what he had. Come to think of it, he'd heard Old Charley grumble something once about the nesters grubbing away at the land all the time, and never getting a decent meal off it. The kid did look hungry at that. Little Bill helped him tie the sack of supplies to the saddle. The kid climbed up and then hesitated, staring off up the street toward the edge of town. Little Bill looked too, then asked quickly,

"Which way you going?"

"North," said the kid, worried-like.

"So'm I," Little Bill said. "Wait'll I get my horse and I'll ride along with you."

Little Bill ran down the boardwalk, stuck his head in the saloon to yell at Charley and then swung up into the saddle of his paint. He trotted up the street to where the kid was waiting beside the old work horse.

"Holy cow!" the nester kid said, his eyes round. "You sure got some outfit!"

"It ain't bad," Little Bill admitted, pleased. "What's your name, anyway?" he asked, as they rode down the street.

"Rob," said the kid, "Rob Hartley."

"Mine's Bill Benson," Little Bill said. "Most folks call me Little Bill." He squared his shoulders a little and sat up in the sad-

dle. "But that's just so's to know me from Big Bill—my dad."

WHEN they rode past the livery stable and corrals out on the edge of town, the gang of town kids was waiting for the nester kid, like Little Bill had figured. They ran for cover, but Little Bill turned the paint and chased them down.

"Listen," he told them sternly. "You lay off this kid, see? I hear of any of you picking on him again and I'll pack my forty-five in and shoot your ears off!"

The gang of kids took off for the center of town, Tubb Miller leading.

"You really got a .45?" Rob asked.

"You're damned right," Little Bill growled, and then admitted tactfully, "It worries Big Bill some, though, if I pack it into town."

They'd gotten quite a ways out of town, when Little Bill looked around, beginning to get a little puzzled. "Say, where do you live, anyway?" he asked the kid.

Rob Hartley pointed. "Right on the other side of the rise—on the crick bottom."

Little Bill's jaw dropped and his eyes bugged out. "You—you mean where the crick runs into the river—in Lem Purdue's old shack?" he asked faintly.

"Well," said Rob hesitantly. "I don't know whose shack it *was*, but it was empty and didn't look like nobody lived there for a long time."

"Holy mackerel!" Little Bill said, looking kind of dazed. "How long you been there?"

"About a week," Rob answered, staring at Little Bill and beginning to be worried.

"For gosh sakes!" exploded Little Bill. "Didn't anybody tell you about Lem Purdue's place?"

Rob shook his head slowly. "Ain't nobody been around or nothing. Why?"

Little Bill sucked in a long breath and let it ooze out slowly. "Ho-ly mackerel!" he said again and added fervently, "Your paw would have been a lot better off if he'd tried to homestead Hell! If Big Bill don't land on you, Jim West will!"

Rob looked puzzled. "Big Bill is your paw, ain't he?" And when Little Bill nodded, Rob asked, "Well, who's this Jim West?"

"He's the Circle R boss," explained Little Bill. "You see, that section of crick bot-

tom is where our ranch, the Double B, and the Circle R come together. You seen where the crick used to run—before it changed its course, didn't you?"

Rob nodded. "We took up the land between the new bed and the old one. Pa says we don't do nobody out of water, because of the river, and he says it ain't been grazed—so nobody must be using it."

"Course there ain't nobody using it!" stormed Little Bill. "If Big Bill caught any Circle R critters, two legged or otherwise, tromping around there, he'd—he'd—" Little Bill shuddered. He could almost hear the Winchesters and .45's whanging away now.

The Double B and Circle R feud had been going on for longer than Little Bill could remember. He'd asked Old Charley once how it got started, but even Charley didn't seem to know exactly, although he had been ramrodding the Double B even in those days. Old Charley had mumbled something about the crick changing its course and Jim West being a stubborn, mule-headed fool and that was all Little Bill got out of it.

Then, shortly after Little Bill's mother died, Big Bill and Old Charley had a spat and Big Bill hired a rustler for a foreman. That cost Big Bill a heap of money, before it was all straightened out, and hadn't helped things between the Circle R and the Double B. For several years now, both ranches drifted their cows back from the gap where the two ranches came together and it was a standard joke that cows that grazed in the creek bottom never had any calves. But it was one of those jokes that brought kind of a dry, mirthless laugh from all parties concerned.

"Well, if your pa don't graze cattle there and neither does the Circle R, I shouldn't think they'd give a whoop about us being there," protested Rob, when Little Bill was frowning and silent for so long.

Little Bill sighed. "Look," he said wearily. "Maybe there ain't much sense to it, but Big Bill and Jim West are awfully touchy about that crick bottom. Neither one wants to run cattle there, because it would probably touch off a range war. This fellow, Lem Purdue, built that shack and then lit out of the country when he found out about the feud. And your pa better do the same!"

Rob looked doubtful. "Pa don't want no

trouble with the cattlemen, but Ma is kind of stubborn. She says this is the first land she's seen that's worth anything and ain't being used."

They topped the rise above the creek bottom and Little Bill grabbed leather, to keep from falling out of his saddle.

"Wh-what's that?" he asked, horrified, pointing at some little piles of dirt.

"Ma's putting up a fence," Rob said innocently. "I been helping. Pa's been in bed lately—ailing."

Little Bill said something under his breath that wasn't "Holy mackerel." Aloud, he said, "A barb wire fence! Gosh, Rob! Your folks must be tired of living!"

He looked at the nester kid and Rob stared back at him, eyes big. It made Little Bill feel kind of uncomfortable, to see those trusting blue eyes, the big hat crammed down so it almost covered the kid's ears, the thin body and skinny arms sticking out of the faded blue shirt.

"W-w-will your pa do anything to ma?" the kid asked fearfully.

"Shucks, no!" Little Bill said impatiently. "But he'll sure lambast into your pa—and burn the shack down—if Jim West don't do it first!"

Tears gathered in the blue eyes and Rob brushed at them with the back of one hand. "Pa ain't fit to fight nobody—right now," Rob said with almost a sob, and then added fiercely, "It seems to me we ain't doing no harm, being where we are—and we got a right to live, same's you!"

A lump formed in Little Bill's throat and he gulped. He felt just about the same way as the kid, but he didn't know what to say. He stared down at the line of dirt piles, looking pretty glum. Then his eyes grew round as saucers and he grabbed hold of the saddle horn again.

"Say!" he said excited. "How far's your ma planning on running that fence?"

Rob looked surprised. "Why, just as far as you see the dirt piles."

Little Bill frowned and then he reached over and grabbed the nester kid by one skinny arm. "Listen," he said. "Do you think you could talk your ma into running that fence clear over to the river? You could use that extra piece for pasture, with the crick sort of making another fence," he urged, as the other looked doubtful.

"Why, I dunno," Rob answered reluc-

tantly. "I guess we got enough wire. But if they're gonna get mad about the fence, it looks like that would make them twice as mad."

Little Bill stifled a groan. "Probably, it will," he admitted. "But I got kind of an idea. You and your ma get started on it as soon's you can. Hell," he added dismally, as if reassuring himself, "You ain't got nothing to lose—that's a cinch!"

It was getting pretty late in the afternoon and Little Bill struck out across the creek bottom and headed for home. He didn't get a few hundred yards from the nester's shack when a horse and rider came galloping up from the river, to cut him off. Little Bill groaned. The rider was waving at him to rein in, and even at that distance, Little Bill knew from the big bay that it was the Circle R boss, Jim West.

Little Bill pulled up and waited. His face was innocent, when Jim West's bay plunged to a halt. The Circle R owner was a chunky, middle aged man, with a hard square face and penetrating eyes. Little Bill's mind turned a few somersaults, before it came up with what he was going to say.

"Howdy, Little Bill," the Circle R boss said, kind of short and his eyes narrowed down. "Squatters?" he asked harshly, looking down at the Hartleys' shack and not waiting for Little Bill to say hello.

Little Bill's chest was kind of tight, but he answered real careless and business like. "Yep."

"Does Big Bill know they're here?" demanded Jim West, icicles in his voice.

"Oh, sure," Little Bill lied brazenly. "Big Bill don't like it much, but he don't want people saying he's the kind to pick on a dying man."

The Circle R owner looked a little bewildered. "You mean there is someone dying in there?" He stabbed a finger at the shack.

"The old man," Little Bill said easily. "If he's gonna die anyway, I don't see no harm in chasing them out. Big Bill says there's some folks would do it too—that ain't got no self respect. But then," Little Bill added, "He don't know what the old woman and the kid are up to, yet. When he hears about that—" Little Bill's voice trailed off, leaving it to the other's imagination what would happen.

"What are they up to?" Jim West de-

manded, his eyes opening up like saucers.

"Well," said Little Bill confidentially. "Big Bill figured they'd be putting up a fence, all right, but he don't know they plan to run it clean across to the river. Dying man or no dying man, he ain't gonna like that at all." Little Bill made a sweep with his hand to show how the fence would go. "Shucks," he added, "That would fix it so's we couldn't even get over on your range to say 'howdy'—unless there was a gate in it."

The Circle R boss jumped a little in his saddle and then stood in his stirrups and looked along the line that Little Bill had pointed out, his jaw hanging. Then his teeth clicked together.

"Just why don't Big Bill want a fence there?" he asked, an edge in his voice and his eyes narrowed down again.

Little Bill tipped back his hat and scratched his head. "Well," he confessed slowly. "I don't rightly know. All I know is he don't want a fence there—because I asked him once, if our calves kept straying off our range, whyn't he put a fence across here—and he just got mad." Little Bill scratched his head some more. "I guess he thinks it wouldn't be neighborly," he said finally, his face clearing.

Jim West stared at Little Bill, his face so grim that there were white lines where the muscles stood out.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Maybe that's it!" And then he asked crisply, "And you're on your way to tell Big Bill, now?"

"Yep," answered Little Bill. "Dunno but what I'd better wait until morning, though. Big Bill is usually in a better humor right after breakfast, than any other time, and I don't know what folks are going to say if he runs them squatters out—the old man at death's door and the kid starving and all. It ain't like we used this crick bottom for anything. Hell, I ain't never seen none of our stuff down here. But," Little Bill wagged his head sadly. "He sure ain't gonna stand for that fence!"

Jim West's face was getting sort of a reddish purple color, and his mouth worked a little, like he had something to say. But he didn't. He jerked the big bay around, gave a little wave and away he went, leaving Little Bill to go on home.

Little Bill didn't sleep very well that night. He kept going over the thing in his

mind, wondering how to approach Big Bill about the fence, but he couldn't work it out. When he came down to breakfast, he took a good look at Big Bill, to see what kind of a humor he was in. Maybe, Little Bill decided, he'd feel better after breakfast.

He kind of hoped the other hands would get through first and leave him and Big Bill alone for a minute, but Big Bill finished at the same time the rest did. Everybody hustled out and down to the corral, Little Bill right on their heels, a big, worried look on his face and leaving half his breakfast. While everybody was catching up a horse and getting saddled, Windy Dalton came galloping across country and pulled his winded bronc down.

Little Bill felt a little sick, when he saw Windy's face. Windy had spent the night at the line camp and he wasn't due back till noon. Little Bill sort of figured what had brought him back early and in such a hurry.

"Bill," Windy said, stepping out of his saddle and walking over to where Big Bill was tightening a cinch. "There's some squatters moved in Lem Purdue's old shack!"

Big Bill swung around, his jaws dropping and then his face got fierce. "What'd you tell them?" he demanded.

Windy Dalton shuffled his feet a little. "I didn't stop. I didn't know exactly what you wanted to do, so I just lit out to tell you about it. Kind of looks like they're putting up a fence—a woman and a kid. I didn't see no men folks around."

"A fence!" stormed Big Bill, his face swelling up with blood and his eyes blazing. He swung on his heel, "Harry! Jack! You two come with me!" He vaulted into the saddle.

Little Bill ran over and tried to attract Big Bill's attention, but he was shouting orders to the rest of the crew and didn't have any time or inclination for small talk. The first thing Little Bill knew, Big Bill and the two hands were heading hell-bent for the creek bottom and left him standing in the corral. Little Bill swallowed a couple of times and then forked his saddle and pounded after them. The thing wasn't working out very well.

He came up to them, when they pulled in on the rise overlooking the creek. Little Bill's heart flopped a few times and then gave up beating altogether. Down on the

flat, Rob and his mother were digging post holes for all they were worth and Big Bill's teeth ground together like he was chewing up the rolls of barb wire.

"Listen," Little Bill said, his voice trembling and grabbing Big Bill by the sleeve. "They—"

He didn't get any further. Big Bill shook himself loose and dug in his spurs. "C'mon," he ordered the two punchers, grimly, and they plunged down the slope, Little Bill trying to catch up again.

The four of them went thundering across the flat and then Big Bill pulled in so abruptly that Little Bill's paint like to ran over him.

Riding across the flat from the opposite direction came Jim West and three of his Circle R hands. They carried Winchesters sort of careless like across their saddle horns. Big Bill stared at them and then kicked his horse into a trot. When he got about twenty-five yards from the piles of dirt, he pulled in again, the two punchers and Little Bill crowding right behind him.

JIM WEST and his bunch stopped on the other side of where the fence was going to be and then the two groups just stared at each other. Little Bill tried to say something again, but Big Bill was glaring at Jim West and not paying any attention. Finally, Big Bill swung out of the saddle and handed his reins to Little Bill.

"You stay here," he said harshly to Little Bill and the two punchers. Then he strode forward, his legs moving stiff and his hand brushing the big .45 on his leg.

Jim West did the same and the two men met at one of the dirt mounds. Rob's mother took one look at the two groups of riders and then ran for the shack, but Rob stood still, face white and scared, waiting to see what was going to happen.

"Howdy, West," Big Bill said, his voice cold.

"Howdy, Benson," the Circle R boss answered, his voice just as cold.

Big Bill's steely eyes looked at the Winchesters and then back at West.

"Jackrabbits," Jim West said carelessly. "The boys have been working too hard." Then he added, "We happened to see the fence going up on your range and we was kind of curious, but I see it ain't you putting it up."

Big Bill got a little red, but he was puzzled too. He didn't exactly understand the other man's attitude and so he jumped to the conclusion that there was something behind West's carelessness. The Circle R boss was acting too cagey to suit Big Bill.

"Why I reckon I couldn't lay claim to this section," Big Bill said politely, getting cagey, too. "I've always kind of figured the crick to be the edge of my range."

Jim West raised his eyebrows and his face reddened, too. His voice hardened.

"The crick ain't always run there," he reminded Big Bill, still being polite.

Big Bill frowned. Little Bill could see that Big Bill couldn't figure out the other man's attitude at all and was afraid there was a trap of some kind. He looked at the dirt mounds and then back at West again.

"I ain't a man to interfere with nature," he told Jim West, shortly. "The crick's been my boundary right along."

The Circle R boss' eyes were like slits. "About the fence," he said softly. "I suppose it would save you a lot of trouble—you not having to turn back my strays all the time."

Big Bill stiffened as though a poker had been shoved along his backbone. There wasn't any doubt but what West was hinting about stray calves.

"You, likewise?" he suggested grimly.

For a minute the two men glared at each other. It was Jim West's turn to look puzzled.

"I take it, you ain't got nothing against the fence?" he asked politely.

"It suits me!" Big Bill almost growled and then added quickly, as if he still smelled something fishy about the whole thing, "I ain't claiming the land." Then he watched the Circle R owner to see what was coming next.

Jim West just looked kind of bewildered. Then he forced a smile. "Well," he said awkwardly, his eyes stunned. "I guess me and the boys better be getting along." He gave a hard look in Little Bill's direction and then turned on his heel. He walked back to his silent group of men, mounted, and, with a careless wave of his hand, was off. Big Bill waved back and then stood with his jaw hanging, watching the Circle R bunch ride over the rise.

Little Bill was so weak that he slid out of the saddle and leaned against the paint's

shoulder, his clothes clammy with sweat, but he was so thankful that his heart had started to beat again. Big Bill turned and came over to his horse, frowning like he still couldn't figure out what West's game was. Rob ran over to where Little Bill stood.

"Did we get the fence in the right place, Little Bill?" the kid asked anxiously.

Little Bill jumped like he'd been shot and reached out for the kid's neck, figuring on strangling him before he could say anything more, but it was too late already. Big Bill dug in his heels and stared at Rob, then at Little Bill.

"What did you say?" he demanded, looking at Rob again.

Rob's face turned white and he began trembling. Big Bill reached out a long arm, to grab the kid, but Little Bill stepped forward.

"He asked me if the fence was in the right place," Little Bill said hastily. "I—I sort of picked it out."

Big Bill was dumbfounded. "You had something to do with this?" he asked, looking like he was going to choke.

"Well," said Little Bill nervously. "You see—they—I—" Little Bill suddenly remembered Jim West's reaction, when he had talked to him. Something that had worked once should work again.

"You see," Little Bill explained, more confidently. "They got stuck here—kind of. They're—" Little Bill dropped his voice and stepped closed to Big Bill. "They're just waiting for his pa to die. But, meanwhile, the kids are starving."

"Kids?" Big Bill asked, looking around and then at the shack.

"Kid," Little Bill corrected hurriedly. "So I made them a proposition. I told them they could stay here—on account of the land ain't being used—if they'd build a fence so's to keep the Circle R bunch from rustling our calves. They didn't want to do it, of course, but rather than starve, they—"

"Wait a minute!" Big Bill almost roared, his mouth working up and down. "Let me get this straight. You—"

Little Bill darted over and grabbed Rob by an arm, dragging him in front of Big Bill. "Look," Little Bill said, his voice sad. "He ain't nothing but skin and bones. They've been living on grass roots for a

week," Little Bill went on, borrowing some from the tales Windy Dalton was in the habit of spinning. "If they can just hold out till the crops come up—"

"Wait—" Big Bill started to speak again.

"Feel his ribs," Little Bill went on quickly. "Look at his arms—feel his ribs!"

Big Bill bewilderedly started to put out one hand and then jerked it back, his eyes widening.

"Go ahead," Little Bill urged, "Feel his ribs. He ain't got no meat on them at all!" Little Bill could see that Big Bill was getting kind of ashamed, because his face was red as a gobbler's. Rob acted kind of embarrassed too, being held out like that, but Little Bill kept a firm grip on the arm. This was no time to be sensitive.

"You see—" Little Bill went on dramatically, warming to his subject, but this time Big Bill's frown silenced him.

Big Bill stepped forward and cupped the nester's kid's chin in one big hand.

"What's your name?" he asked gruffly.

"R-Rob Hartley, sir," the kid stammered.

Big Bill's eyes got kind of soft. He stared at the kid for a long time, taking in the big hat, the faded clothes and work roughened hands.

"Okay, Rob," he said suddenly, patting the kid on the cheek. "You tell your folks nobody is going to bother you." He frowned at the little mounds of dirt and then shrugged his big shoulders. "You ain't going to hurt nobody by being here, I reckon," he added and then swung up into his saddle and rode off, the two punchers looking back curiously at Little Bill and Rob.

Little Bill stared after them and then took off his hat and wiped the sweat from his face with a big bandana.

"Gosh!" he said weakly and slid down the paint's leg to sit on a rock.

"I think your pa is awfully nice!" Rob said, eyes shining.

Little Bill glared at the nester kid and

then he flung his hat down wrathfully.

"Nice!" he exploded. "No wonder he patted you on the cheek. You talk like a doggone girl. And you look like one, too," he added morosely.

Tears formed in Rob's blue eyes and the full lips quivered. Little Bill was sorry right away. Hell, the kid couldn't help it if he looked like a girl. It was the big, blue eyes and the nose like—like—well, like his mother had, for instance. Little Bill didn't remember his mother too well, but the picture that hung above Big Bill's desk had big, blue eyes and a nice nose, like this nester kid.

"But I am a g-g-irl!" Rob said defiantly, at last. She put both arms around Little Bill's neck and kissed him full on the mouth. "And from now on, I'm your girl," she announced confidently.

Little Bill pushed her away and staggered over to the paint. He made three grabs for the saddle horn, before he caught hold of it. Then he turned slowly, one foot in the stirrup, his face turning from red to dead white and then red again.

"A g-g-girl!" he mumbled, his voice shaky and then pulled himself up in the saddle.

Rob stood staring up at him, the tears still in her eyes, but smiling. "I think you're awfully nice, too," she said softly and then added. "Can I be your girl, Little Bill?"

Little Bill frowned down at her, fierce as he could. "I got a girl already," he told her gruffly. "Clara Wilson."

Rob's lower lip trembled a little and she caught it between her white teeth, glaring at Little Bill.

"I'll—I'll punch her right in the nose!" she promised fiercely, her fists clenched, and then turned and ran toward the shack.

Little Bill gaped after her a little while and then turned the paint toward the Double B ranch.

"Doggone it," he said thoughtfully. "I bet she would, at that!"

GUARD YOUR FUTURE

BUY UNITED STATES VICTORY BONDS

INVEST IN DEMOCRACY

Pony Bob Carries the Mail

By
Charles Briguglio

DURING the eighteen months that the famous Pony Express was in existence, all kinds of long distance records were chalked up, and under all kinds of adverse conditions, but the longest sustained ride of them all was made by Pony Bob Haslam. A chunky, muscular little fellow, with a quick facility for getting himself out of tight spots, Haslam was one of the most dependable riders on the Pony Express roster.

Haslam's territory was in the Carson's Sinks of the Nevada desert, and was one of the most troublesome and dangerous runs along the entire length of the Pony Express route. The "sinks" was also the home of the Pah-Ute Indians, who were none too friendly with the whites. They were always making trouble, burning the relay stations down, killing the station tenders, and running off the stock. But when the Pah-Ute Indian war of 1861 broke out, things really began to get hot along the Pony Express trail in Nevada.

Haslam's run was right through the heart of the Pah-Ute country. His "stint" was from Friday's station to Buckland's ranch, a distance of seventy-five miles, and it was there that Haslam made his greatest ride.

Leaving his home station of Friday's and going eastbound with the mail, Haslam found upon reaching the relay station west of Buckland's that there was no fresh mount available, as the Pah-Utes had raided the place and driven off all of the stock. Pushing on to Buckland's on his tired mount, Haslam found upon arrival that the rider who was supposed to relieve him was not available. But the mail, however, had to go on, so Haslam changed mounts and went on in the place of the other rider. He rode to Sand Springs, a distance of sixty-five miles, and from there to Smith's Creek,



Like a pistol shot he raced through the bloodstained Pah-Ute territory.

making a total distance of one hundred and ninety miles since leaving his home station of Friday's. And riding night and day, not a single Pah-Ute Indian did he see, although the country was swarming with hostile redskins.

At Smith's Creek, Haslam met the west-bound rider, and exchanging mail, he started back for Friday's station over the long, dangerous, Indian-infested trail.

On his return trip, Haslam found that the Indians had visited the relay stations where he had passed only a short while before, leaving death and destruction behind them. Arriving at Cold Springs, he found a scene that would have unnerved any man. The station was a smoking ruin, the station tender and his helpers dead and scalped, and the stock run off. At Sand Springs he found the same death and desolation as at Cold Springs repeated.

How Haslam ever got through to Friday's, he never knew, but he finally made it. When he arrived at Friday's, the mail he carried was behind time by only three and one-half hours. He had been in the saddle thirty-one hours, and had ridden three hundred and eighty miles—for an all time record!

Savage Death dogged the dust of little Bob Haslam when he topped every speed and endurance record of the fabled Pony Express in his desperate dash through the deadly and hostile Carson's Sinks!



The stains on the horseshoe were not rust—they were blood. And a bitter glance in the mirror at the cruel scars on his face confirmed for Jeff whose blood it was.

BRAND HIM KILLER!

By M. Howard Lane

JEFF KING had all of his possessions laid out on the big bed. All save one, and he hadn't taken it down yet. He straightened and turned toward the door—all of his motions were slow today, for this was his twenty-first birthday, and he had waited its coming for eleven years. There was no need to hurry now. It was here, and all his rebellion at the slow passing of time had faded.

He lifted his eyes toward the lintel above the door of his room, and stared at the

horseshoe nailed there. The stains on it looked like rust, but they were blood, his own, and Jeff King's hand unconsciously touched the right side of his face. He had no need to look in the mirror to see the marks that rose up alongside his nose, and down across his cheek. The nails in that horseshoe would fit those pockmarks perfectly.

"I've been waiting a long time to take this trail," Jeff thought, and his memory went back to a day of agony that still seemed

★ **The livid scars burnt more than his flesh, for they touched off the flame in Jeff's brain, which told him without words that the killer who now faced him wore a hidden brand far more hideous—and much more deadly—than the one that had condemned Jeff to years of hell-on-earth!** ★

like a macabre dream filled with gunshots and red flame, and death—

How he'd gotten away Jeff King never knew, and grizzled Tom Cameron and his wife hadn't been able to figure it out either. "You were just a little tyke, son," Cameron had explained. "Ten years old, I'd guess, and nigh froze to death when we found you. Ye'd been struggling all the night through with that cracked noggin and torn face, and only the good God could have saved ye—"

"Ye were staggering along the Platte River Trail, and me and Mother just couldn't believe our eyes when you showed up across the plain. We'd spotted the column of smoke just about dark the evenin' before, and hid out pronto. We figgered it was a burning wagon, and guessed a bunch of Sioux had dodged Fort Reno and come raidin' down along the Trace. We were skeered, I tell you, and when we drove on in the mornin' and found you it warn't no wonder we couldn't believe our eyes."

The Camerons had found him on the Platte River Trail, one side of his face a horrible mass of lacerated flesh. He'd had one hand pressed to it, and in the other his locked fingers clasped a horseshoe. They'd tried to take it from him gently, and he'd cried and clung to it the tighter.

"Ain't anybody goin' to take this," he'd told them stubbornly. "It flung off the hoss of the man who killed my dad and mom, and hit me in the face. I'm keepin' it—keepin' it until I can give it back, with interest!"

The Camerons had reached the burned wagon—a Conestoga filled with household goods much like their own, and they had gone about the grisly chore of providing for the dead and salvaging what they could for the boy. They had asked Jeff King why his folks had been attacked, though they'd known that the Sioux needed little excuse to jump emigrants heading into the Powder River Basin, and the youngster had snorted scornfully.

"The bunch that jumped our wagon

weren't Sioux! Sioux don't ride shod hosses, and they don't wear bandannas over their faces. They didn't scalp my dad or mom, either. One of 'em whaled me over the head with his six-shooter after the shoe from his hoss flew off and hit me, and I guess they figured I was daid. Some day they're going to regret not making sure—"

That had been a boy talking—a ten year old. Now he was twenty-one and his resolve had never wavered. The Camerons, he knew, had hoped time would dull his feeling, but the marks on his face and the horseshoe over the door wouldn't let him forget that he wore the Brand of Cain.

SLOWLY Jeff moved toward the door, and he was still thinking of the past. The Camerons had found land near the new town of Junction where the Bozeman Trail cut off from the Oregon Trace. Tom Cameron had started a blacksmith shop and trading post, and had taken more than one weary horse or ox in payment for shrinking a new tire on a wagon wheel. His supply business had prospered, however, for the Bozeman was thick with men wanting to try their luck in the new gold fields of Montana, and as the years wore on, Jeff had taken over the management of their small ranch. A boy could forget a scarred face out by himself on the range, but he couldn't let the hate die from his heart. It had colored these growing years, for he had spent most of his time patiently training himself, so that he would be ready when the day came to pick up the trail of the renegades who had left a boy for dead back along the Platte River Trail.

Now he was twenty-one, and the promise he had given Tom Cameron that he wouldn't leave their Circle C until then was ended. All he had to do now was take down that horseshoe, and pick up his saddlebags, and ride away from the only home he'd known all these years. Yet it was hard to leave. Downstairs he could hear Mom Cameron making a lot of unnecessary noise in the big, pleasant kitchen and he could

hear Tom banging mightily on the anvil out in the ranch blacksmith shop. He was old enough now, and had enough money in the Junction City Bank, since selling out his town business, to quit work, but the habit was still his.

Jeff cursed under his breath, and pulled his hand back from the horseshoe as though it were a rattler ready to strike. He'd have to go downstairs and convince 'Dad' Tom that his working days were over. That sale of the blacksmith shop had been a mighty nice deal, though a little on the odd side when a man came to think about it.

Some hombre from Cheyenne had ridden whirlwind into Junction, so Jeff had heard, and had started throwing money around like a drunken Indian. He'd bought the Cameron Wagon and Blacksmith Shop, and old Ben Gillin's Mercantile Mart. He'd taken over the Rancher's Rest Saloon, and bought out the hotel-keeper, Sam Beaucamp. At the rate the jigger was buying, he'd own most of Junction before long.

Jeff had even heard the cuss had approached Claire Walters to buy her dress shop, claiming he'd make it the finest place for the ladies to buy their clothes from the Platte to Cheyenne. Claire had primly advised him that her shop was already the finest, and she was quite satisfied with it. Jeff chuckled as he thought about it, and then his scarred face sobered. He was going to miss Claire. She was one girl who didn't ever seem to notice the blue pock-marks that disfigured his face.

She wasn't all he would miss either around this peaceful neighborhood. There were some blooded calves in one of the pastures he'd fenced. They were kind of an experiment, and in time might help breed up the longhorn stock that roamed the open range.

He'd also miss the Sunday shooting matches, and the pleasant beer afterwards in the Rancher's Rest—miss old Sheriff Jim Connelly, and the others who joined in on the shooting. There was a lot of good-natured rivalry over those matches, though most of the fellows joshed a lot. They claimed Jeff King didn't have a nerve in his body when it came to spraying lead with his black Colts. "Cold turkey, he's the best danged shot on the Powder!" they'd say.

Sheriff Jim would usually grin and add:

"I could use a young deputy, Jeff. Time might come when I'll need one."

Jeff had always taken the hoorawing good-naturedly. He'd never talked much about his plans, and now the grimness was back on him again, like a coat of mail.

'Dad' Tom had tried once to point out the uselessness of the quest he'd determined to make when he came of age. He'd told him the trail would be cold, and Jeff had laughed without mirth.

"Cold?" he'd said harshly, and his smoke-gray eyes had turned savage enough to make Tom Cameron shiver a little. "The trail I take won't be cold. I remember that renegade's laugh, and a man's laugh don't change much along the years. I can still see his hand holding that Colt, and I remember the way his little finger curled around the butt. His eyes were yellow in the light of our burning wagon. I'd say he was likely a handsome cuss behind that bandanna. A man's laugh don't change either, Tom, and I remember that. Neither does his character. He'll still be a renegade at heart no matter how fancy he might act by now.

"Now there's one more thing, and then I don't want to talk about it no more. He'll remember the scars he put on my face, and if I don't recognize him, he's sure to know me. Know I've come back from the dead to kill him, and he'll try and beat me to it. That'll be my tip, if I have to wait that long!"

"But where'll you start, son?" Tom Cameron had asked. "There's a steel mill where your dad's wagon was burned, and Texas cattle grazing around old Fort Reno. It's eleven years, son, and that's a danged long time. So where'll you begin?"

"I'll start right in Junction," Jeff had answered him recklessly. "One place is just as good as another."

Again Jeff reached up for the horseshoe, and this time the sound of hooves coming into the yard diverted his attention. He turned toward the front window of his room with something almost like relief running through him. As long as that symbol stayed above his door he was still a part of this peaceful community. Once it was down, he'd be riding the lobo trail—

"You're just stallin'," Jeff King accused himself. "You don't want to leave here. Leave Claire—"

He could hear the riders in the yard now, and Tom Cameron's hail from the smithy shop.

"Howdy, gents," Cameron greeted. "Oh, it's you, Jim, and you, too, Mr. Towner. Light and set awhile, gents. Mr. Towner, I hope you ain't regrettin' your bargain already!"

Jeff reached the window and looked down at the men in the yard. This Towner was evidently the Cheyenne hombre who'd been throwing his money around. Jeff eyed him with interest. He was a big, prosperous looking man with a shark-tooth smile, and confident manners.

"No worry on that score," Hal Towner boomed. "But we've a little problem on another point. That's why me'n the sheriff rode out to see you folks. Is your son handy?"

"My son, ain't really my son," he answered Mr. Towner. "Jeff's a younker me'n Mom picked up when we come into this country, and we've been callin' him our own ever since. His name is King, and he's twenty-one today—"

"Why," said Mr. Towner heartily, "that's a mighty fine time for a young fellow to step out on his own."

"Dunno," said Tom Cameron, "but what he's got other plans."

The sheriff took up the conversation, and he instinctively lowered his voice, but Jeff could still hear him. "Tell yuh, Tom," he said, "this ain't to go any farther than us an' Jeff, but I got the word this afternoon by telegraph that the Grapevine Bunch are headin' for Junction. They got their name because they allus seem to know when the bank in a leetle town like ours is loaded with cash. And ours sure is. It's just after round-up, and most of the ranchers have deposited the dinero from their sales. You and the rest of the folks who sold to Mr. Towner have put the proceeds in the bank, and he's got a considerable stake in there himself.

"The trouble is, and this is shore between you and us, the bank's safe ain't workin' right. They got a new one comin' in by train, but it ain't here yet, and if that Grapevine Bunch should strike Junction they'd git most of the money in this neighborhood without much trouble. A robbery like that would break the bank, and us along with it!"

Jeff watched Tom Cameron's brow wrinkle. "I guess I still dunno as why you come out to see me," he said at last.

"Jeff is the one we really came to visit," Jim Connelly said. "He's the best danged shot in these parts, and he ain't got a nerve in his body. I want to deputize him, and set him to watchin' the bank until the new safe comes in."

THERE was a sudden, wild rebellion in Jeff King's body. It felt to him like fists were pommelling his stomach, like fingers were tearing at him. He had a vow to fulfill—a debt to his father and mother to pay off before he could ever return to Junction, and call this country his own. And yet he owed these people something, too. All 'Dad' Tom's money was in the Junction Bank. If the Grapevine Bunch hit town, they might make a successful raid. They'd robbed other community banks and left ranchers and townsmen destitute.

Yes, he owed 'Dad' Tom something. Jeff glanced at the horseshoe above his door, and then he pushed his head out of the window. "I'm your man, Jim," he called down. "Let's head for town!"

He became acquainted with Hal Towner as the three of them rode toward Junction. The stranger from Cheyenne was a tall, spare man, with a hawk-beaked nose, and tawny eyes. His clothes were black, well-cut, and he looked thoroughly prosperous.

Jeff didn't like the way the man kept eyeing his scarred face, and Connelly evidently noticed it for he said, "Jeff picked up those marks when he was just a younker. His folks ran into renegades back along the Platte, and he was the only survivor—"

"Some day," Hal Towner said, "this country will become civilized. Right now we're all gambling with our lives and our fortunes—"

"Why buy, then?" Jeff asked.

"Real estate," Hal Towner said, "is the best investment a man can make. Bank robbers can't steal it!"

After Jeff was settled in the bank, Jim Connelly brought him that most wicked of all weapons, a sawed off shotgun. "You know how it is, Jeff," the sheriff said. "I don't want the word of what might happen to git out. Rile folks up and start a run on the bank, and we'd have double trouble

on our hands. I'll be keepin' a close eye on things myself, and if you need any help I'll be handy."

"So will I," Hal Towner said heartily. "After all, my hotel is just next door."

Jeff prowled the bank, and he decided he could probably open the ancient safe himself with a chisel and hammer. No wonder they wanted a guard for the community's cash. The safety of the Junction bank lay in its barred windows and strong doors. No one would get inside tonight—not even the sheriff if he came around after it got much darker.

Right now the town drowsed. Stores were closed, and nearly everybody was home getting their supper—which reminded Jeff that he'd forgotten to mention eating to the sheriff. He'd get along, though, even without an evening meal.

"Good training," he thought. There'd be plenty of nights when he might go hungry on the lobo trail of the renegades who'd made him an orphan.

At the bank's rear door he heard a rap, and the rattle of dishes. "Jeff!" a voice called guardedly. "It's me, Claire. I've brought you some supper from the hotel—"

Smiling suddenly, Jeff moved to the door and unbolted it. Seeing Claire would be a treat he hadn't counted on.

The lock turned under his hand. He pulled the door inward, and the weight of Claire Walters struck him, and staggered him backward. A cascade of scalding black coffee caught him full in the face, blinding him as he tried to swing the shotgun in his hand, for he'd had one second to see the three men grouped behind the girl. They were wearing bandanna masks over their faces, and one of them was laughing as he surged into the bank with his Colt upraised to strike. That laugh was like something coming up from the pits of Hell, and Jeff King remembered it out of a boy's red nightmare back along the Platte River Trail.

He saw something else blurrily, through the film of scalding coffee—a long, little finger curled about the butt of the Colt that was striking down toward his head.

"You ain't goin' to die, Scar-face," he heard the man laugh. "This town is goin' to need a goat come morning!"

Shaking hands were wiping tenderly at his scalded face when Jeff opened his eyes. He recognized Claire, and blinked a mo-

ment before full awareness came to him, and then he remembered what had happened. The sheriff's visit to the Circle C, his ride into Junction with the lawman and Towner, and the surprise attack that had left him helpless. Involuntarily, he turned his head. The safe's doors were hanging open, like the sagging lips of a toothless old man.

"The money is gone," Claire said through a sob that caught in her throat. "Oh, God, and it's my fault. I didn't hear those men behind me—they walked like ghosts."

Her choice of words startled Jeff as he struggled to sit up. "They were ghosts," he told her softly. "Ghosts out of a buried past."

"You mean—?" Claire's brown eyes widened.

"Yes," Jeff nodded his throbbing head. "I'd never forget their leader's laugh, and the way his little finger curled around the butt of his gun. Funny," he added mirthlessly, "I was planning on pulling out this afternoon without waiting to say good-by. Planning to hunt those men, and instead they came hunting me!"

Claire helped Jeff to his feet, and he clutched a tall bookkeeper's stool to keep from falling. Then the dizziness passed, and he noticed his shotgun on the floor. The renegades hadn't even bothered to disarm him, for his Colts were also in their holsters.

The feel of them as his hands touched the butts was steadying to his nerves. He laughed shortly. "It's going to be hard to convince the folks around this town that I wasn't in on this party when they see me still wearing my hardware."

"I—I—" Claire gave him a startled look. "Why, they might think we were in on it together. That I talked you into opening the door so they could walk in."

"That's the way they planned it," Jeff answered. "A mighty clever gent arranged this whole show." He stepped across the bank to the tall front windows. A summer moon, round and lovely as one of the gold pieces that had been stolen, shed an almost daylight brightness on Junction. Dappled shadows pooled beneath the shade trees that lined the street. He could make out a few people strolling through the warm evening, and the lights of the Rancher's Rest up the street. There was no sign of excitement.

Jeff turned back to the girl. "This town don't even know it's broke!" he told her bluntly, "and I don't think we're going to tell them just yet—"

"What do you mean?" Claire Walters asked. "Jeff, if you don't it will look worse—"

The headache was gone now, and in its place was a sudden, savage exhilaration. Jeff King's mind was clearer than it had ever been before. "Listen," he said, "if those renegades made a run for it Jim Connelly would have spotted them. He's on the look-out for any strangers trying to ride out of town tonight."

"Two men I've never seen before rode in late this afternoon while Jim and Mr. Towner were out to your place," Claire said. "I saw them pass my shop and put up at the hotel."

"Go on," Jeff said softly. "Were they still around when you were having supper?"

"Yes," Claire nodded, "but they left the dining room when Mr. Towner came to my table and asked me if I'd take a tray over to the bank for you. He—he made kind of a joke out of it, saying he doubted if a careful young fellow like you would let anybody else in, even to bring his supper. Do you suppose—?" Claire Walters seemed to sense for the first time the direction of his questioning.

"Three men followed you," Jeff said softly. "I'm supposing one of them was Hal Towner. He's been around Junction long

enough to hear about the scar-faced orphan the Camerons have raised all these years. So maybe he figured on killing two birds with one stone. Put me in trouble, and keep his own shirt clean, all at the same time. Nobody around here would ever connect their first citizen with robbery."

"But why, after buying into our town—"

Jeff cut her short, and reached down to pick up the shotgun. "Check that gent's back-trail," he told her shortly, "and I wouldn't be surprised if you'll find out he's bought into other small towns along the Powder. Town's the Grapevine Bunch have raided since. Look, Towner owns the lion's share of business here, and he's bought it all within the last ten days. What did everybody do with the dinero? Hell, they stuck it in the bank to their accounts, leastways a big share of it. So the Grapevine Bunch comes along and robs the bank. Towner gets his money back, and the property he's bought along with it. People sure can't blame him if they lose their dinero to a bunch of bank robbers. They can't come around and ask him to give back their property. It ain't no skin off his nose if they're busted. Why he's probably gone around with the longest face of all after the Grapevine Bunch has cleaned out a town. Now," he ended grimly, "we're going to see what his face looks like when I walk in."

"I'll go and find Jim," Claire said. "You can't do this alone!"

Jeff put his hand on the girl's arm, and

Dusty could reckon with any man alive, on his own powdersmoke terms, but when it came to a woman—and a howling hell-cat from the far forks of Bitter Creek, at that—he was stymied. He stood to lose the best friend he ever had—to say nothing of the sprawling, fabulous Hat Ranch he had worked and sweated for, in his

"DEATH WATCH ON THE HAT"

By Wayne D. Overholser

Other thrilling tales of the Old West, by Ruland Waltner, Zella Pearsol, M. Howard Lane, and other first rank writers, in the big October issue.



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15. THE COWBOY'S MAGAZINE
Ace-High
WESTERN
STORIES

he didn't look like a man just turned twenty-one. His scarred face appeared old as time itself, seared by Hell's own fire, and the memory of a red night on the Platte River Trail.

"Seems like I've waited most all my life for this chance, Claire," he said briefly. "It's my fight. I'll see you, after it's over—"

HE stepped through the open back door, lithe and quick as a cat, and his eyes lifted to a second-story room in the hotel. Thin gauze curtains covered the window, but the blind was up. He saw dark shadows against the pane, and a pair of arms lifted as though two men were clicking glasses. Rear stairs climbed to the second-story hall of the building. It had been mighty easy, he thought, to step from the hotel to the bank and back again. He didn't blame those hombres for celebrating. They had underestimated only one thing—the memory of a Platte River orphan.

Jeff moved toward the stairs. He was too intent on his own mission to notice Claire Walters speed away in the opposite direction on her search for Sheriff Connelly.

A riser creaked under his boots as he reached the second-story landing and paused at the screen door. The hall beyond was empty. The lighted room he'd noticed was two doors down on the left.

Jeff paused in front of it, hand reaching to turn the knob, then some force beyond his own will made him hesitate and glance down at the shotgun in the crook of his right arm. Slowly, he shifted the weapon and snapped it open, and a shock that was like a heavy chill made him shiver. The chambers of the weapon were empty!

One of the bank robbers had taken the shells from the gun to damn him in the eyes of Junction. An unloaded shotgun would be more than enough proof to satisfy most people that he'd participated in the raid. And an empty shotgun in the room he was about to enter would sign his death warrant.

Jeff found spare shells in his pocket, shoved them home. The gun was under his arm again when he turned the door-knob, and kicked open the panel. There were three men at the plain table in the center

of the room with a bottle of whisky between them.

Two of the men, Jeff King had never seen before. The third was Hal Towner, wearing his conventional black. Standing between the other two, he paused with a whisky glass halfway to his lips, and his face grew blank with surprise.

"King," he croaked. "I thought—"

Jeff's eyes were on the man's long little finger curled about the glass. "You thought you killed me once," he said tonelessly, "but you failed. Tonight you had your chance again, and made your second mistake. You never figured a maverick kid might remember the way you hold a Colt, or the sound of your laugh when you're ridin' high. Well, you're not riding high right now, Towner—"

The man on Towner's right reached for his Colt. He did it confidently. "That scatter-gun is empty!" he cried.

Jeff let the man's Colt almost clear the table, then he fired from the hip without moving the muzzle of the shotgun, and he watched the buckshot blast blow the three of them back from the table as the roar of the weapon shook the room. Death wiped the surprise from the faces of two of those men, and he heard Towner writhing on the floor.

"We pulled the loads in that cutter," the man groaned.

Jeff looked down, and his eyes were the same color as the eddying powder-smoke about his knees. "You pulled 'em," he said quietly, "and a ghost came back from the Platte to put 'em in again. You'll live to remember that, Towner!"

"That he will," said Sheriff Connelly from the doorway behind Jeff. "God, boy, you shouldn't have tackled this bunch alone—"

Claire was in the room beside him, and Jeff could feel the pressure of her body against his arm, and the clean, fresh scent of her hair as she tipped her face back to look up at him. He studied her eyes, and he could tell that she wasn't even seeing the scars on his face and forehead. Why, in time those marks might even disappear. He'd have something to cherish now that would make him forget he'd ever been a Platte River gun-orphan.

HANGNOOSE RECALL

By Harold Gerard

What sudden compassion made Wild Bill Hudson turn his back on life and freedom and surrender to a lynch-mad mob right after he had bludgeoned his way through a gunsmoke ambushade, in the nerviest escape in frontier history?

BILL HUDSON knew his gang was doomed when he saw the size of the posse. Those mounted men closing in on the handful of Hudson's gang were tight lipped, grim fighting men and peace officers.

But Bill and his men had never given up without a struggle. As long as there was the breath of life in their bodies and lead in their six-shooters they would battle for existence. Hadn't they always lived the kind of a life they pleased? They were reckless but not cowards.

For years since Hudson and his Colt had come to the gold and cattle country of the west as a fugitive from Pike County, Missouri, he and his gang had been as tough a crowd as ever stood up a line of stage coach passengers in a mountain roadway!

Each dead man, each fallen horse was an avenue of escape.



But now it looked like the end of the road. The posse had surrounded them near Salida, Colorado. Behind them there was timber and safety but between them and the protection of trees riders were moving forward, closing the certain death ring.

With a curse and a shout to his men, Bill Hudson whipped up his guns, dug his heels into the horse's flanks and rode hell-bent toward the nearest posseman. The ominous silence that had preceded his move gave way to volleys of shots, the thunder of horse's feet and the shrill shouts of men. Tight lipped, breathing hard, Bill Hudson saw the men of the posse fall back, then pull up again for a new attack. Whenever one of them slid from his saddle Bill breathed deeper. Every man meant an avenue of escape.

He didn't know how long it was he went on firing, whirling his horse about, zig-zagging, sending death in every direction, when he suddenly realized he alone of his gang was left alive. With a quick eye Bill saw the one advantage he possessed. As he squirmed and wheeled in the battle he had brought himself nearer to the woods. The men who had guarded that exit had either been killed or had closed in, leaving the avenue open.

With a dash Bill Hudson made for cover, with bullets singing a song of death in his ears, some of them nicking his body. Then his horse went down. But Bill Hudson's luck was with him that day. When the horse fell, it pitched him forward, only a few feet from the first underbrush of the forest. Unhurt, Hudson ran for his life, dodging, twisting, fleeing deeper and deeper into the forest. The shouts of the few men who remained in the posse followed him for a while but eventually died away altogether.

Hudson made his way over the wooded mountains till he came to the cabin of a miner. It was night. He looked through the cabin window and saw that a lone miner was the only occupant of the shack. Hudson shouted. He was tired and hungry and weak from the loss of blood and the long trek on foot.

The miner did not answer. Hudson pounded on the door. The miner did not even stir. Then Hudson went around to the back door and knocked again. Still there

was no answer. He knocked and shouted in vain. In a blind rage Hudson returned to the window, drew his gun and shot the miner!

Instead of breaking into the cabin to search for food, Bill Hudson went on to another. Here he was admitted and a hot meal was laid out for him by the two prospectors who lived there. While he ate he questioned his hosts about the old miner. Did they know him?

They did. "He's a deaf mute," one of them told Hudson.

"A deaf mute!" Bill Hudson choked on a piece of beef. He had killed an innocent, inoffensive and defenseless old man. The fire suddenly went out of him. Bill Hudson who had poured lead into many a man suddenly felt the hand of remorse upon him.

Slowly he resumed his meal—food for which he now had little appetite. While he chewed listlessly little incidents from his past began creeping into his mind to upraid him. There was his wife for instance, a beautiful red-haired girl who had tried to reform him. She had warned him that something like this would eventually happen. And now it had happened. Suddenly Hudson got up from the table.

"I am Bill Hudson," he said. "There is a price on my head. I can't go on through life with the thought of that deaf-mute on my mind. When I knocked and shouted he paid no attention to me. I thought he was a coward, afraid to open the door. I never had any use for cowards. I didn't know he couldn't hear me. I shot him dead. I'm going back into Salida now and give myself up."

Bill Hudson walked out of the cabin, and late that night he gave himself up to a small crowd of men in the streets of Salida.

The word spread. The crowd grew larger and larger. Hudson stood calmly in the center of the crowd, unperturbed. Finally a young man came through the crowd carrying a rope.

"Prepare yourself to die," someone told him.

"I'm ready!" Hudson said simply.

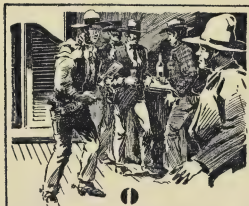
They hanged him to a tree on a street corner. There, swaying in the breeze, the townspeople found the body at sun-up. Bill Hudson, cold-blooded desperado, fighting man and gang leader had "hanged himself."



TRAIL BLAZERS *of the* FRONTIER

• DRAMATIC HIGHLIGHTS IN THE LIVES OF OUR PIONEERS •

by CEDRIC W. WINDAS



In 1868, on the wild and woolly frontiers of the Pacific, a casual event such as a lawman shooting a lawless, was no occasion for screaming headlines. But when Robert Murrel, peace officer of Marin County, California, outfought the six renegade Cotter brothers single handed, even Western journals conceded that was NEWS.



Murrel walked into the Diggers Rest Saloon with a cattle-stealing warrant for Eddie Cotter. Ed and three of his brothers were drinking at the bar. Asked if he would submit quietly Ed attempted to toss his whiskey into Murrel's eyes. The lawman sensed the move, ducked his head and took the liquor on his hat brim.



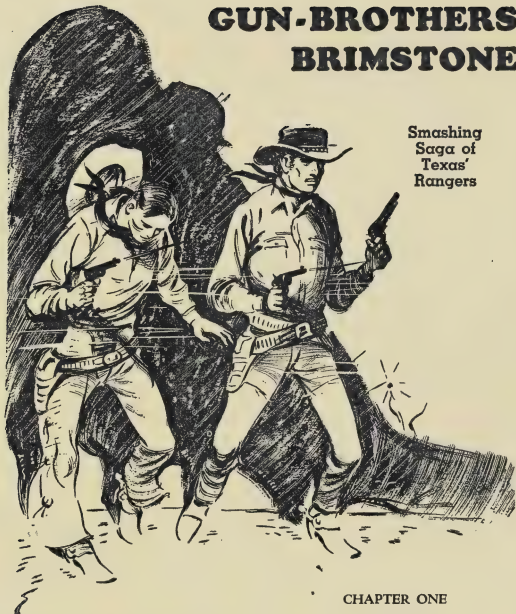
Cotter then flashed his gun, but Murrel's first bullet took him in the mouth and into Eternity. Surprise and rage confused the aim of the outlaw's brothers. Murrel smoked them down one by one, but took a smashed rib and wounded thigh in trade. From a nearby barber's shop the two remaining Cotters stormed into the saloon.



They came with guns flaming, and Murrel shot the leading outlaw through the lungs. This caused his brother to pitch forward over the falling gunnie, right at the officer's feet. Murrel's final bullet broke his enemy's back. Thus died the whole renegade Cotter clan at the hand of one resolute lawman who was a first class fighting man.

GUN-BROTHERS BRIMSTONE

Smashing
Saga of
Texas'
Rangers



CHAPTER ONE

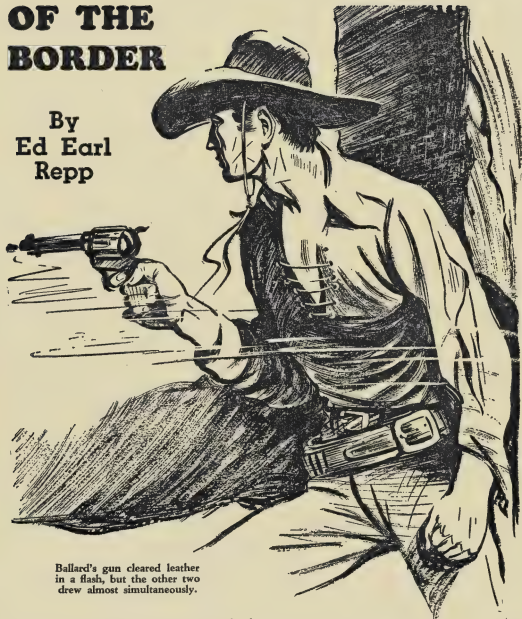
Man Hunt

The Big Thicket—morass of evil and lawlessness from which they had escaped—once more claimed these three: the girl, the Ranger and the renegade. And each knew that one of them must return to Santone in a pine box!

IT WAS blistering hot in the Big Thicket. The breeze that stirred the matted, jungle-like chaparral was like a furnace blast against the dripping faces of Ranger Stan Ballard and his companion. Except for an occasional rattler or armadillo, no sign of life disturbed the silent corridors of greasewood, buckbrush and hackberry. But Ballard knew well that the border country teemed with lurking, un-

OF THE BORDER

By
Ed Earl
Repp



Ballard's gun cleared leather in a flash, but the other two drew almost simultaneously.

seen life. Eyes watched from every bush.

Beside him, Gip Hunt shifted his wiry body in the saddle and wiped the dirt and sweat from his thin, tanned face with the red bandanna knotted around his neck. But for his obligation to the gold badge pinned inside his moist shirt, he would be back in Santone hoisting a cool beer at the Buckhorn or playing billiards on the new tables up on the plaza.

Hunt weaved low over the saddle horn to avoid a thorny limb and said, "This

Rangerin' ain't no picnic, Stan. You sure you aim to bring old Zack Archer in? That is, if we don't take down with a dose o' lead poisonin' first?"

"Those are my orders," Ballard replied in a low voice. "I'd rather cut off my right hand than carry 'em out. There isn't much else I can do."

Gip Hunt's face sharpened with interest. "Opinion in Santone is sort o' divided on that. Some say no lawman has what it takes

to bring old Zack in. Others say you might be able to do it—but you won't."

"Orders are orders," Ballard said vaguely, lapsing into the uncomfortable silence that had stopped Gip Hunt from asking questions along the hot, dreary miles.

"We gettin' close to old Zack's place?" Hunt inquired uneasily.

Ballard said, "Yeah. Some of the old man's gun-wolves ought to stop us any time now. Whatever happens, Gip, don't go for your gun. It'd be your last move."

"You should know." Hunt's dark face bore a gray tinge of honest fear. "I hope you realize what you're doin'."

Ballard did not answer. He sat his saddle easily, showing no weariness from the three day ride. He looked small on his big star-faced buckskin, yet there was a heaviness to his wide shoulders that compensated for his slim build. From flat crowned hat to battered boots thrust deep into brush-scratched tapaderos, the gray dust of the Texas border country lay upon him. A few miles back, he had carefully wiped the grit from the .45 Peacemaker that sagged in the tied-hard holster on his thigh. Now the worn, black gunbutt struck an incongruous note to his dusty appearance.

Under the wide brim of his hat, his gray eyes probed the dark brush aisles with restless weariness. He had been born here; he had spent most of his life in this wilderness. He knew the ways and the minds of the lawless, hunted men who lived here, daring the Law to come after them. Several wearers of the badge had tried it. They had disappeared into the Big Thicket, never to be seen again.

Ballard wondered if he and Gip Hunt would ever ride out to civilization again. He had been wondering all day why old Zack Archer had let them get this close to the sprawling hacienda that served as headquarters for the criminals of his lawless legion. It was not like the old man to relax his vigilance this way.

"Pull up, Rangers!"

The sudden command came from a huge cactus patch, higher than Ballard's head and directly in the path of the faint Indian trail he was following. The two men reined in their horses.

"Yore hardware," the hidden voice clipped harshly. "Leave it in yore holsters, and hang yore gunbelts on yore saddles.

Don't try anything funny. We got half a dozen guns pointed yore way. Savvy?"

Ballard said, "We savvy, Fenwick. There'll be no trouble."

As he peeled his gun-gear from about his slim waist, he silently swore at his luck. Why did it have to be Mike Fenwick who picked him up? A bank robber and a killer; old Zack Archer's right-hand man and the most dangerous outlaw in the brasa; a man who hated his, Ballard's, guts. The odds against two lone Rangers riding in and talking to Zack Archer were steadily rising.

Even though old Zack was Stan Ballard's foster parent!

"Git out of them saddles!" Fenwick's harsh voice ordered after Ballard and Hunt had hung their belt guns on saddle horns. And with the words, Fenwick rode from behind the sheltering cacti, astride a giant black horse.

Seen from the ground, the black looked larger than ever. But the gaudily dressed man in the tooled, silver-inlaid saddle did not look out of place. Mike Fenwick was the biggest and best proportioned man that Ballard had ever seen. They had not laid eyes on each other in five years, yet time had touched the outlaw lightly. His mighty shoulders filled the short charro jacket; his muscular thighs looked like sturdy oaken logs under the tight trousers; his slim waist seemed almost too fragile to support the twin sagging cartridge belts that encircled it.

A contemptuous grin touched his swart, broad face as he swung his horse across the trail so that the silver-chased Colts in his steady hands covered the two Rangers.

"You damned fool," he said, staring down at Ballard. "Why did you come here?"

"That's my business," Stan answered softly. "If it'll ease you any, it's between Zack and me."

Fenwick's jet eyes glittered oddly. "You ain't talkin' to the old man," he said in deliberate tones. "You ain't talkin' to anybody, Ballard. I know why you're here, and word reached me soon after the two of you entered the brush. I waited here—alone. Better say yore prayers, gents. I'm goin' to beef you lawdogs, *muy pronto!*"

"Why?" asked Ballard, trying to stay the pull of those trigger fingers. His heart

hammered wildly inside him and a cold sweat covered his skin. Yet a part of his brain remained cool and clear, and he knew that the answer to this manhunt lay behind Mike Fenwick's ambush.

Fenwick laughed softly, mockingly. "The three of us can keep our secret, can't we? That was just chin-talk about several guns coverin' you. I planned it this way. Quick and silent. I reckon they's no harm in tellin' you why. Yore headquarters in Austin got wind of a revolution brewin' along the border. They heard that a lot of rifles and ammunition was cached down here somewhere. And they figured that Zack Archer was the kingpin behind it all. So they picked out the only Ranger that could shoot and sent him here to try and stop whatever was going on.

"You'll never turn in a report, Ballard!"

Stan said, "It begins to make sense now. You're the man we want. Not Zack. But how did you learn about my orders?"

"I'm not sayin'. I got connections, Ranger. You got the proof of that."

"What about Zack?" asked Ballard. "He won't dirty his hands with an uprising. What will happen when he hears about it?"

A momentary concern wiped the glitter from the mounted man's eyes. The twin guns wavered in his hands, mute evidence of a struggle inside his brain. Finally, he laughed harshly.

"This thing is bigger'n anybody dreams it is. It's been planned for years and it'll spread all over Texas. Old Zack's the only man that could stop it. I'll kill him if he tries."

"Mebbe," Ballard said, tensing his muscles for a desperate grab at his gun. "Zack'll take a lot of killing—"

The clop-clop of the approaching horse's hoofs sounded faint on the grassy trail. Fenwick stiffened in the saddle and stared over Ballard's head. Seizing the opportunity, Stan yelled a warning at Gip Hunt. The two Rangers scattered, diving into the brush like a couple of scared cottontails with a fox on their scent.

Unmindful of their escape, Mike Fenwick stared unbelievably at the slim rider who came into view. His hard face softened. A surprised cry of recognition broke from his lips.

"Kitty! Kitty Archer! You've come back to me!"

CHAPTER TWO

Reunion in Hell

OLD Zack's pretty daughter had eaten the two Rangers' trail dust for three days now. She had locked the doors of her swank millinery shop in San Antonio, donned the man's range clothes that she had put aside five years back, and ridden out of town on a rented steeldust from a livery stable. She carried food in the saddlebags and water in a canteen. A .38 pistol rode in the sagging holster on her slim hip and a Winchester weighted down the saddleboot. Kitty Archer could hold her own with any man.

As she rode, as easily as any buckaroo, Kitty thought of that last night in San Antonio, and the memory quickened her pulse and brought tears to her blue eyes.

Stan Ballard and she had walked along the bank of the river and a round moon had drenched the three shadows with light. They had sat on a bench under a moss-festooned live oak. Stan had stared moodily at the water, letting her do all the talking. It consisted of plans for their approaching marriage and the new house they intended to build.

Abruptly, he said, "Kitty, listen to me. There may not be any wedding or house. I was given a new assignment today."

"What?" she asked gently, trying to still the alarmed pounding of her heart.

"I've got orders to bring Zack out of the brush. Gip Hunt and I leave here tomorrow morning. We won't come back without the old boy."

A past that Kitty had tried to forget reached out and caught her in merciless memory. It made her slip out of Stan's arms and sit upright facing him as if he were a stranger.

She said in a tight, low voice, "You'd arrest Dad—after all he's done for you?"

"The charge against him will be treason," he declared stonily. "I'm under oath not to say anything more about it. And—Kitty, I am remembering how much I owe Zack. How can I ever forget it?"

"Then don't go!" she snapped. "Turn in your badge. There isn't another man that could handle the job."

"But they'd try," Stan said miserably. "I can't let them do it, Kitty. My superiors trust me. They gave me a badge, knowing

old Zack Archer had raised me from a pup. They told me to forget the past, that the present was all that counted."

"Very well!" Kitty bit out, pulling the engagement ring off her finger and thrusting it at Stan. "The future means a lot to me! I can't marry my father's murderer!"

She fled from the spot, then, crying. He had not tried to follow her.

Later, when cool reasoning came again, the quarrel had seemed ridiculous. The thought of two lone Rangers braving the Big Thicket, Zack Archer's domain, with the mission of capturing him and bringing him into the Texas courts, dried the tears in Kitty's eyes and brought color back into her tanned cheeks.

Fear replaced the amusement long before dawn and sent the girl after the two men. Even her father couldn't save Stan from a quick death, once those border outlaws learned of his business. Only one man could control those hardened killers: Mike Fenwick who was in love with her and who hated Stan because he had left the *brasada*, taking Kitty with him.

Now as dusk crept over the border wilderness, Kitty pushed up the steeldust's pace. Another hour would see her home. The thought brought her no gladness. Under different circumstances, it might have. She loved her father despite his criminal way of life, and she understood the reasons for it. After the Civil War, Zack Archer had seen his property seized by the land-grabbing carpet-baggers who moved into Texas and took everything in sight. His wife died from a bullet wound received in a midnight raid by armed riders. Both of Stan Ballard's parents were murdered that same night. Taking his infant daughter, Kitty, and the orphaned Stan, Zack fled into the brush. There he found many men like himself—and a preponderance of hunted outlaws with a price on their heads.

A natural leader, Zack soon gathered a band that included Mike Fenwick, one-time member of Quantrill's guerrilla band. The two men welded their outlaw legion into an arrogant and powerful machine. No prosperous carpet-bagger was safe from their lawless reach. A bank here, a sizable beef herd there, and a six-foot grave for any grasping blue-nosed Yankee that tried to stop them.

Zack Archer and Mike Fenwick respect-

ed each other, and they got along with their men. Zack did most of the brain-work because he had a lot of friends scattered over Texas and they managed to send him many invaluable tips. He stayed at home while big Mike rode out at the head of their plundering band. Ruthless and cagier than any *ladino* that skulked in the thickets, big Mike seldom failed to carry through any mission placed in his hands. His strength didn't all run to brawn, either. Among the outlaw clan, it was freely admitted that he was as smart as old Zack, perhaps smarter.

THE years passed, and old Zack's two "kids" reached maturity. Kitty turned into a golden haired, beautiful woman who had all the men fighting over her. Stan Ballard won the respect of his rough comrades as he grew to manhood, though he never became one of them.

Zack Archer learned the real meaning of trouble then—trouble that almost drenched his lawless legion in its own blood.

He had always planned on Kitty and Stan getting married when they grew up. Over the years, he saved his money until he had twenty-five thousand dollars in gold coin. He intended to give it to them for a wedding present—upon one stipulation: they had to leave the *brasada* and never return, even for a visit.

Then Big Mike stepped into it. Good-looking and dashing, he began courting Kitty though he was almost old enough to be her father. Zack thought his lieutenant was joking at first. So did everybody else until jealousy caused Fenwick to badger young Stan into a fight one day. Big Mike should have won that brawl hands down but he didn't.

Over-confident, he drew his fancy guns, only to have them shot out of his hands by two well-placed bullets from Stan's gun. The kid could have killed Big Mike but he didn't. Tossing aside his gun, he picked up a broken ax handle and waded into his heavier opponent. He didn't back off until the spectators pulled him away from what was left of his rival.

Everybody agreed that Big Mike had taken the licking of his life. Even Big Mike said so when he was able to walk and ride again. But the cause of the trouble was gone. Stan Ballard had left old Zack for good, taking Kitty with him. They would

not accept the old man's money, and they did not get married. Stan managed to join the Texas Rangers. Kitty opened a millinery shop in Santone.

Now we're back, Kitty was thinking. Five years haven't changed things. Stan is a man now. Big Mike will kill him.

Her fears merged into chilling certainty when a bend of the trail brought her face to face with Mike Fenwick. There was no mistaking his huge form on that giant horse. Nor was there any mistaking the two riderless Ranger horses before him. Seeing the two guns in his hands, Kitty knew that Stan and Mike had met.

Numb with horror, she rode toward Big Mike, expecting to see two bodies sprawled lifelessly on the ground. And then she heard him cry, "Kitty! Kitty Archer! You've come back to me!"

* * *

Stan Ballard watched that meeting from the shelter of a thorny evergreen magote. He dared not show himself. Kitty's presence would not stop Fenwick from using those guns if he sighted the two Rangers again. And knowing the depth of Big Mike's infatuation for the girl, Stan and Gip realized that the man's joy at the unexpected sight of her was all that had enabled them to dive into the brush unharmed.

Now that he had time to think about it, Stan felt astonishment at Kitty's sudden appearance in the brasada. Yet it was just like her to follow him after their quarrel.

She stopped her horse alongside Stan's buckskin. Under the trail dust, her face was white. She stared at Big Mike out of blue eyes that resembled chips of ice. There was a brittle edge to her soft voice when she finally spoke.

"Mike! What happened? Where is Stan?"

The big man eyed her for several seconds, a tender smile softening his craggy face. "It's been a long time, Kitty," he said, disregarding her question. "I've still got the note you sent me. 'If ever I come back home,' you told me, 'I'll come to stay. There won't be any Stan nor any shame over living in the Big Thicket.'" Big Mike's next words were gentle. "I always hoped you'd come back to me. Is this your answer, Kitty?"

Big Mike was baring his soul to the one

person he cared for, and Ballard felt like an unseen intruder.

"No," the girl said softly. "I haven't come back. There'll never be anyone but Stan. I came to save him. Am I too late, Mike?"

Fenwick's face paled noticeably in the growing darkness. All the wild savagery and hungry longing inside him seemed to leap into his hoarse voice when he answered her.

"Git on home," he said roughly. "Ballard and his pal are holed up in the brush. I aim to smoke 'em out. Pronto!"

Kitty had not missed the significance of the holstered six-guns hanging on the two Ranger saddles. "You're a brave man, Mike," she jeered. "This time you might whip—"

The sharp toe of her boot dug into the buckskin's dusty side. Startled, the animal reared, then crashed into the thicket beside the trail. Gip Hunt's horse whinnied and started to follow, stopped when Fenwick rode his black into its path.

"Your gun, Stan!" Kitty shouted frantically. "Your gun!"

Big Mike said, "You little fool! You've ruined everything. I'll have to take you with me now."

Sliding his guns back into holsters, Fenwick reached for the girl. Coolly, she yanked her .38 out of leather and squeezed trigger. One of Big Mike's huge hands closed about the barrel, deflecting the slug into the air. His other hand cuffed alongside her head, making her brain spin crazily. Before she lost consciousness, Kitty thought she heard a sob on her assailant's lips.

CHAPTER THREE

The Border Legion Splits

STAMPEDING the buckskin in his direction was a lucky break, Ballard knew as the beast plunged toward him. Hampered by the dragging split reins, the boogered horse was easy to stop. Kitty's shout reached the slim Ranger as he swung into his saddle and grabbed the Peacemaker from out of leather. The flat report of the .38 sent the buckskin into a series of bucking lunges through spiny undergrowth and tangling chaparral.

Ballard could do nothing but swear and

hang in the saddle. By the time that he quieted the horse and rode back to the trail, Kitty and Big Mike had disappeared.

Gip Hunt seemed to crawl out of nowhere. After he had caught his skittish horse, he mounted and joined Ballard. "You reckon that big son will harm the girl?" he asked. "You got any idea where he's takin' her?"

"Big Mike," said Ballard, his face white, "ain't himself when Kitty is around. He's like a bull in rutting season. He's liable to do anything to force her to marry him." Stan's voice broke for a moment. "If he touches her, she'll kill herself. I know. We can't trail them in the dark. This means an open break between old Zack and Fenwick. Big Mike must have a secret hide-out set up somewhere down here. Zack will know about it."

"We're going to see Zack, pronto. Follow me!"

The hacienda from which old Zack Archer ruled this country was in reality a huge fort. Towering adobe walls encircled a large patio; a multitude of clean, white-washed rooms stretched about the base of the outlaw stronghold; slitted windows pierced the thick mud walls on four sides and one mighty iron-bound gate, that was always closed and guarded, provided the only entrance. A six months' supply of food was stored in underground cellars, and the artesian well in the center of the patio supplied ample water. "The Castle" had been besieged many times. It had never been stormed.

"Gawdamighty!" said Hunt. "An army could live in there. How long did it take to build it?"

"Nobody knows. When the Mexicans moved south of the Rio Grande, they left it. Zack found it and moved in. It's the only home I ever knew, Gip."

The two Rangers quit the shelter of the brush and rode boldly across the cleared area about the huge structure. Ballard rapped on the gate's stout oaken planks with the butt of his Peacemaker.

"Supper time," he explained to his companion. "No need for a guard anyway, unless they're expecting trouble."

A tiny window in the gate swung open and a face peered out at them. "Who's there?" a gruff voice asked.

"Stan Ballard and a friend," the Ranger

said. "Open up. We want to see Zack." "Rangers!" The man swore in astonishment. "Hang around. I'll bring Zack. You gents better pray that he lets you inside."

A few minutes later, the gate swung open. Riding into the patio, Ballard and Hunt dismounted in full view of about fifty curious outlaws.

Zack Archer hurried forward to greet them. "Howdy, son," he greeted Ballard in slow, even voice. "Long time no see."

And as they pumped hands, Gip Hunt stared openly at this notorious old man, an expression of amazement sliding over his face. From the shaggy, white hair on the hatless head to the battered flat-heeled boots, old Zack resembled the poorest farmer that ever stretched his barbed wire about this section of land.

Ballard said, "I've got to see you alone, Zack. Right now."

"You're hungry. Better fill a plate first?" The old man had expertly sized up their hunger. "We can talk later."

"No," snapped Ballard. "This can't wait."

"Bueno," the outlaw chieftain agreed. "We'll make chin music in my room." Turning to Gip Hunt, he said, "Go ahead and eat, son. You got the run of the place. It ain't often we got company."

In Zack Archer's cool, spacious room, Ballard sank down in a hide-covered chair and sat there before his foster parent's intent gaze.

"Kitty . . ." the old man said hollowly.

"She followed me from Santone. I didn't know it. We ran into Big Mike. There was a fight . . ."

Ballard told Zack everything. "There wasn't any use trying to trail 'em," he concluded. "It looks like a showdown between Big Mike and you. I didn't know how you stand—or if you knew what was going on. I came here to find out. Tell me where that big devil took Kitty, and I'll settle with him by daybreak!"

"I dunno," the oldster said heavily, the myriad wrinkles on his leathery face seeming to deepen. "For a long time now, I've seen a split-up comin'. I got wind that Big Mike was runnin' rifles into Mexico. That means he's got a big supply cached somewhere up here. At first I aimed to jump him about it. Then I saw what he was up to and kept my mouth shut, hopin' to learn

more about what it was. I never did."

Zack's voice broke. "I—I didn't care much what happened, son. You and Kitty was both safe from here. My life's about done. Big Mike could've stepped into my place, if our men was willin'. Most of 'em are, especially the young ones. They live on action and I'm too old and slow for 'em." The old man's eyes blazed with fury. "Big Mike over-played his hand when he stole Kitty," he rasped harshly. "I'll pay him for that if it's the last thing I ever do!"

The two of us will," Ballard corrected him.

"What about your orders?" the other man asked wryly. "Ain't you takin' me to Santone?"

Ballard shook his head. "We want the man behind this revolution. That means Big Mike. I'll take him in alive, if possible."

* * *

The two Rangers slept in a room that night. They were up at dawn and eating breakfast with the outlaws when Mike Fenwick's messenger rode into the patio. He was a weasel-faced man who, Stan remembered, went by the name of Shadow.

"Big Mike says the time has come," he told the group of intent men. "He's takin' over The Castle today. Zack can join him or step down. That's his choice."

"My gal?" Zack Archer asked tensely, making no effort to conceal the fear inside him. "Has anything happened to her?"

Shadow said, "Not yet. They's a dozen men watchin' her. Big Mike says tell you he'll bring her back to you—safe—when you turn The Castle over to him. He wants the two Rangers, too." A smirk came to the messenger's face. "They'll never bother us ag'in."

Zack raised a shaking hand to his bearded, ashen face. "Looks like me'n the Rangers has the most to lose," he muttered. "Reckon we'll talk it over alone."

"Shore," agreed the skinny messenger, confident of the answer. "Take yore time. I'll light and eat."

In his room, Zack faced the two lawmen. "This looks like the end of the trail for me," he told them. "I'll see that you boys get out of here. When Big Mike takes over, I'll play my hand out as best I can. There's still a few men I can trust. They'll go over to Mike's side but they'll follow

my orders. We'll snake Kitty out of this mess somehow."

"And we'll help," said Ballard, admiring the oldest's courage. "You said you could get us out of here. How?"

"You won't leave?" Zack asked, and Ballard knew the old man was pleased. "This fort is a queer place," he whispered. "Probably built by the old Spanish Conquistadores. I've spent hours examinin' it and I've learned a lot of its secrets. Look!"

Striding over to the massive wall that comprised one side of the big room, the old man pulled aside a gaudy Navajo blanket that covered the aged adobe bricks. Inserting the muzzle of his pistol in a small hole that centered one of the squares, he pushed steadily.

A section of the wall pivoted inward, showing a dark passageway in the gloom beyond.

Ballard stared incredulously. As a kid, he'd played all over the fort. He'd never stumbled on anything like this.

"Cute, ain't it?" Zack drawled. "The whole damn place is worse than a piece of cheese. You can get in or out of any room and listen to everything that's said in any of 'em. Our underground cellar used to be a dungeon, I figger. You can spy down there, too. A tunnel leads under the wall in case you want to slip out quiet-like. That's how I aimed to get you out of here, Stan."

Removing his gun barrel from the door, the oldest stepped back into the room. Smoothly, the section of wall slid back into its place. Ballard strained his eyes. The secret exit was cleverly hidden; no trace of it showed on the weathered wall.

The Ranger could not hide his grin as he thought of the many advantages this knowledge gave Gip Hunt and himself. There might still be a chance to rescue Kitty and dehorn Big Mike Fenwick.

"Let's talk this thing over," he said in a low voice. "Then you can turn Gip and me over to Big Mike."

CHAPTER FOUR

Death to All Rangers

BY NOON of that day, Big Mike and his little party had ridden into The Castle and taken over. Kitty slid off her

steeldust and into Ballard's arms, a tired and scared girl who whispered rapidly in his ear.

"Big Mike's turned loco, Stan! Whatever you do, don't arouse his temper. I—I managed to get his promise not to murder you. I'm not sure he'll keep it."

She trembled in Ballard's grasp. Her face was chalky white under a layer of trail dust. The pressure of her warm fingers on his arm was a silent warning as she tried to slip past him. But he would not let her go yet. A black fury enveloped him at thought of Kitty begging Big Mike to spare him.

"Wait," he ordered, trying to clamp down on his temper and knowing that he could not control it. "What happened to you last night? If that son laid a hand on you, I'll—"

"He treated me like a lady," Kitty interrupted, "if that's what you mean." The side of her head still ached where Big Mike had struck her. But, sensing Stan's mood, she dared not tell him. "He sent for a preacher in Corpus Christi. We're to be married right away."

She could not stop the tears that squeezed past her eyes. And suddenly her brave front collapsed. She buried her face against Stan's chest, sobbing miserably.

Ballard stood there, holding her trembling body, hating the man who had caused her this grief. "Zack's in his room," he whispered. "Go to him, Kitty. Things aren't as bad as they seem. He'll tell you all about it."

She left the patio, brushing past Fenwick who had just emerged from her father's room.

Big Mike stopped in his tracks at sight of Ballard and Gip Hunt who lingered close by. Thunderclouds gathered in his swart face.

"Ballard!" he roared in a voice that brought a sudden hush upon the fort. "You and yore friend git yore horses and ride! When you're back home and all in one piece, thank the future Mrs. Fenwick for the favor."

Stan shook his head. "We're not fools!" he shot back. "You can't afford to turn us loose. I'll lay odds that we'd ride into a dry gulch stake-out. You can go to hell!"

The festering hate that had eaten at Fenwick's brain for five years showed clearly

now. His hands moved swiftly. Ballard found himself staring into the muzzles of the silver-chased Colts.

"Git their guns," Big Mike snapped at the weasel-faced Shadow. "When I'm through with them, bigod, we'll tie them in their saddles and stampeede their horses. I told Kitty they'd ride today. They will!"

After Shadow had collected the two Rangers' weapons, Fenwick handed his own six-guns to a companion. Then he strode toward Ballard, towering over the smaller man like a huge giant.

"Ranger," he said, "you worked me over with an ax handle one time. Remember? You were just a kid and I thought you'd be easy. I always wondered if you could do it ag'in. I'm aimin' to find out."

If Big Mike took another licking, surprise and speed were the two elements that would defeat him. The thought ran through Ballard's mind as he went into action.

He catapulted across the space between Fenwick and himself, a savage bunch of bone and muscle that hit the larger man like a battering ram. Big Mike staggered backward. Planting a foot behind the man, Ballard drove the palms of his hands into that massive chest. In that mad tangle of threshing arms and legs, the maneuver went unnoticed but the amazed onlookers saw the new outlaw chief sprawl flat on his back. The shock of the fall shook the patio.

Roaring his rage, Fenwick struggled to get up. Ballard let him climb to hands and knees before moving in. This fight had no rules or science. Big Mike would ignore them and Ballard could not win using them. Before the crouched man could rise to his feet, Ballard sent his crooked knee into the long line of that stubborn jaw.

If the blow had landed squarely, the fight would have ended promptly. Big Mike's neck would probably have been broken. But the man's hunched shoulder caught the main force of the punch. Again he went to the ground but this time a flailing hand closed about Ballard's leg, yanking him down in the dust with his opponent.

"Now, bigod!" came Big Mike's triumphant yell.

Ballard felt the full fury of those powerful muscles for the first time as Fenwick gathered him close in a bear hug. Breathing became pure agony as his ribs con-

BRIMSTONE BORDER BROTHERS

stricted under merciless pressure. The strength drained from his body. Bones would soon crack, yet he was powerless to break that deadly embrace. Unless . . .

Big Mike's hot, fetid breath swept over Ballard's face as he increased his strangling grip. Summoning his last bit of strength, the Ranger brought his knee up into Fenwick's groin. The breath gusted out of the big man's lungs in one mighty whoosh and his arms relaxed their hold about Ballard. For a moment Ballard lay there, fighting the nausea that weakened him.

He didn't remember climbing to his feet. He didn't notice the awed hush that held the outlaw spectators spellbound. He was only conscious of the pain in his chest and Big Mike, clambering to his own feet. He knew he mustn't let the other man get up. Calling on muscles that felt like water, he flung himself on the outlaw.

Big Mike was a sick man, too. His face was pasty white and he could not stand erect. Bent forward at the waist, his breath coming in great, wheezy sobs, he stood there on wobbly legs and met the attack. He jabbed a long arm at Ballard. His rock-hard fist seemed to explode in the Ranger's face.

Consciousness became a hazy cloud about the smaller man as he slid to the ground. He knew Fenwick was bending over him. He felt the man's powerful hand fasten in the collar of his calfskin vest and jerk him onto rubbery legs. He saw Fenwick swing his fist again and he shook at the impact. But there was no more pain. Only a clinging consciousness that held for perhaps a dozen sledgehammer blows.

BALLARD heard the low murmur of voices over him when he came out of his coma. Wisely, he kept still, his eyes closed, not wishing to reveal his wakefulness until he learned who the talkers were. His body was one solid mass of aching nerves and flesh.

"... hell to pay if Ballard dies," a deep voice rumbled in hushed tone, and the Ranger picked up the conversation over him, recognizing Mike Fenwick's deliberate speech. "I wouldn't have no control over Kitty. No tellin' what she'd try to do, and old Zack would side her. Damn



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such a temper anyway! It only brings me trouble."

"The girl will cause you plenty grief," an oily, venomous voice, that Ballard recognized as Shadow's, said hesitantly. "Every hombre that's ever laid eyes on her has wanted her. You know that, Mike. Kitty Archer's one in a million. Unless she wants to stay here with you, they'll be no holdin' her. If I was you—"

"That's enough!" Fenwick cut in angrily. "I know the risks I'm takin'. There's some things a man can't help doin', Shadow. Kitty got into my blood years ago. I've never stopped tryin' to get rid of her. I can't do it. Come hell or high water, I'm goin' to marry her. Any man that crosses me will suffer. That's why we got to put the two Rangers in leather on their way."

Shadow said, "That won't be before mornin' now, mebbe longer if Ballard is bad hurt. You want me to call our boys in? No use of them stayin' out in the brush all night if they ain't collectin' Ranger bounty till tomorrow."

"Yeah," said Fenwick. "We can send 'em back out early in the mornin'."

The two men left the room, and Big Mike was still talking. "Put guards all over The Castle. Don't let anyone see Ballard. Zack didn't raise enough fuss over this deal. They's something almighty funny goin' on here. . . ."

Ballard smiled bitterly. He had beaten Big Mike's plan to send him and Gip Hunt riding out to certain death. But at what cost?

He found himself stretched out on the filth and dust of one of the fort's underground rooms. A candle-stub's guttering light threw weird shadows across the mud walls from its position on the floor near him. His limbs felt like they were encased in cement, though he was not bound in any way.

No bones seemed to be broken. Gritting his teeth against the pain of protesting muscles, he climbed onto his feet. His face must be a wreck, he thought, tenderly moving his fingers over its puffed and battered outlines. Big Mike had done a thorough job of it.

But he'd slipped up in one spot. He'd been too careless in figuring that he, Stan,

BRIMSTONE BORDER BROTHERS

had had all the fight taken out of him. The strength would flow back into him once he moved around enough to loosen stiff muscles. With a sixgun in his hand, he'd still be Big Mike's equal.

His first problem was to replace the Peacemaker they had taken away from him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Castle of Death

IF WHAT old Zack had said about hidden exits was true, there should be a secret door in this room. The thought ran idly through Ballard's mind as he weighed his next move. Thinking him helpless, the outlaws probably would not enter the room again until morning. The coup that he and Zack Archer had planned would be executed long before then.

He stooped and picked the candle off the floor. Patiently, he circled the walls of the room, giving the adobe bricks his careful attention. The fourth time that he probed a hole-pierced brick with the blade of the Bowie knife, which had been hidden in his boot, he felt the wall give under the pressure of his hand.

Before stepping into the subterranean passage, he wiped the floor surface clean of his footprints, using an old burlap bag for the purpose. If the outlaws discovered his escape, there would be no tell-tale tracks pointing to the means of his flight.

Years of dry dust lay underfoot in the hidden corridor. The dank smell of rot and age rolled against Ballard like an invisible wave. Holding the candle overhead, he surveyed the inky depth of the narrow passage as best he could. There wasn't much to see. He had his choice of two directions; blindly he turned and strode to his right.

A flight of steep stairs loomed ahead after about twenty steps. He ascended them, coming up into a passage similar to the one below. This would be the corridor that speared the thick wall about the fort.

Those doors and the cumbersome mechanism that operated them were plainly visible on this side. Putting his eye to one of the peepholes in the wall, Ballard looked into the room on the other side.

A kerosene lantern hung from a pole



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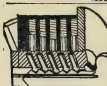
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rafter, its smoky light flickering down on the four roughly-dressed men seated in crude chairs about a table.

The passageway turned to the left. Three rooms beyond the ell, the Ranger found Gip Hunt bound helplessly in a wooden bunk. No one else was in the room. Hunt's eyes opened wide as Ballard opened the secret panel and stepped into view.

"Gawd!" he muttered as the keen edged Bowie slashed through the rope about his wrists and ankles. "Your face! It's worse'n I thought it would be. I figgered you was done for, Stan."

"We'll join Zack now," Ballard said. They slipped out of the room, taking the lantern with them. And as they made their way toward Zack Archer's quarters, Stan told his companion of the conversation between Mike Fenwick and Shadow in the cellar.

"Then this is showdown," Gip Hunt mused aloud. "Tonight tells the story. It's Fenwick or us." And anxiously, "How many men did Zack say would side him?"

"Mebbe a dozen."

Hunt did some rapid oral calculating. "Countin' me and you and Zack, that makes fifteen of us. Fifteen ag'in forty odd outlaws. You reckon we can handle such odds, Stan?"

"We've got to," was the answer. "That's the way we planned it."

They stopped at Zack Archer's big corner room. After looking into a peephole, Ballard's curiosity as to why the old man had not come searching for him was answered. Big Mike was sprawled lazily in a chair, talking to the deposed outlaw chief and his daughter.

"Some mighty big Texans are backin' this revolution," Fenwick was saying. "Their names would give you a jolt. They been organizin' ever since Texas joined the States. I'm gettin' plenty of dinero to arm and arouse the Mexicans that still think this land belongs to them."

He paused, eyeing his ex-chief shrewdly. "I ain't proud about the way you got kicked around in this deal, Zack. Say the word and I'll cut you in on half the profits—and we'll share in runnin' The Castle?"

Kitty's blue eyes flashed fire. "Dad isn't interested!" she burst out. "He's no Texas

BRIMSTONE BORDER BROTHERS

traitor! The scheme is fantastic anyway. You can't win."

"Who cares," Big Mike drawled. "We git our money as we go along. No matter which side comes out on top, our Border Legion goes ahead in the same old way."

"No," Zack declared at last, his voice so low that the two Rangers behind the wall could barely hear him. "My Border Legion is gone. I've seen it breakin' up for a long time. I've had some tough men under me in my time, but most of 'em loved Texas. We never picked on Texans, just worked over the carpetbagging Yankees. I ain't 'blamin' you for what happened today, Mike. The Castle's full of tough youngsters that crave money and action. Under me, they ain't been gettin' it."

His voice hardened. "You'll make 'em rich—if you live long enough."

Zack unhesitatingly said, "You're a capable man, Mike. Few people stand up to you. It's made you hard and stubborn—and too sure of yourself. You're goin' to find people that won't take pushin' around, people that'll fight back. Remember that, amigo."

"People like you and Kitty and Ballard?" Big Mike asked. "Is that your answer, Zack?"

The door swung open, cutting off Archer's words. The outlaw, Shadow, burst unannounced into the room, his thin face twitching with excitement.

"The two Rangers!" he babbled. "They're gone! Just like spooks! And nobody saw 'em go!"

Fenwick came out of the chair in one

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smooth motion, his swart face mirroring his alarm. "By hell, we got to round 'em up!" he swore, unmindful of Kitty and Zack. "Start every man searchin' the fort. Put a guard around the horse herd in case they git outside the walls and try for mounts. Warn ever'body to shoot to kill if they sight 'em."

Absorbed with this new problem, Big Mike followed Shadow to the door.

"The two of you stick here," he warned harshly. "I'll be back to finish our talk."

The door closed behind him, and his heavy, urgent footsteps faded away in the patio. Ballard and Hunt chose that moment to open the secret panel and enter the room.

Kitty's face paled at sight of Stan's ghastly face and blood spattered clothing. "That beast—" she sobbed, running into his arms. "We thought he'd murdered you."

She had never been so desirable, and Ballard had never wanted a woman's coddling more than at this moment. Gently he disengaged her clinging arms and stepped back from her. A cold hell lurked in his voice as he said:

"Big Mike will wish he had killed me, Kitty. We've got to move fast. You get into the tunnel where it's safe. I left a lantern in there. If we don't come for you, you can escape under the wall."

"You better join her, son," old Zack said gruffly. "You're in no shape to fight."

"Yeah," urged Gip Hunt. "This'll be a good chance to fog it out of here while Zack and I keep 'em busy."

"Like hell, I will!" Ballard told them, trying to swallow the lump that rose in his throat. "Where can we get hold of some guns, Zack? Let's end this deal right now."

"Not ag'in those sons when they're lookin' for us," protested Zack. "That wasn't our plan. It's suicide this way." He shrugged his shoulders, seeing that Stan was not to be swayed. "They's some Colts and ammunition cached away in the tunnel."

SOMEONE had dumped fresh fuel on the cookfire in the patio. The red flames licked at the black sky, casting a flickering, uncertain light over the spacious enclosure.

BRIMSTONE BORDER BROTHERS

Pulling an old hat of Zack Archer's over his battered face, Ballard eased into the confused search that had scattered men singly and in groups all over the place.

Threading his way through the noise and confusion, Ballard made for the cellar. He found the stairs empty. On the lower floor, he heard Fenwick's booming voice.

"Ballard didn't leave this room," Big Mike said angrily. "Not the regular way, bigod!" Stan heard him thumping on the walls with the butt of a pistol. "I wonder what's behind this 'dobe mud? Sure, you don't believe in ha'nts, Shadow?"

"Answer your boss, Shadow," Ballard said softly, stepping into the room.

Over by the far wall, Big Mike froze in his tracks, one of his flashy sixguns held by its barrel in his right hand. Slowly, he turned to face the door. Shadow stood to his right, his eyes widening with fright at what he saw in Ballard's cold eyes.

Ballard's gun was in his holster. He intended to use it, and the two outlaws knew it. There was no need for words. The two men cast one quick look at each other before going into action.

Big Mike's finger was hooked in his pistol's trigger guard. He flipped the weapon over with lightning speed, bringing the ivory handled butt into the palm of his hand with a meaty thud. Smoke and flame blossomed from the gun's muzzle as he squeezed trigger in that same liquid motion.

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crashing down upon that of Big Mike's.

Expecting a sixgun reception from the
pair, Ballard was not caught off-guard. He
never knew whether he or Big Mike fired
first, as he scooped his .45 out of its holster.
He did know that the first slug from his
gun caught the giant outlaw directly over
the heart. His second bullet followed the
first. His third shot entered Shadow's
snarling mouth, tearing away his head.

Ballard stood there watching his two
enemies sink motionless to the dirt floor.
The thought came to him that he should be
dead too. Yet he had come out of it with
only one bullet track across his ribs.

Overhead, he heard the sound of pound-
ing feet as Fenwick's men hurried toward
the cellar to investigate the shooting. The
need for a quiet escape prodded him. As
he headed around the two dead men for
the secret panel in the wall, he saw it open.

"Hurry, Stan," Kitty's soft voice urged
him.

Through the peepholes in the ancient
wall, he watched the outlaw gang rush into
the room and gather about their dead lead-
er. He saw the fear that rode them at sight
of their two comrades. He saw their inde-
cision and helplessness when old Zack and
his faithful men slipped into the room with
drawn guns and disarmed them.

"I reckon my job here is finished," he
told Kitty, drawing her tight against him.
"What Big Mike didn't know was that we
have the names of most of the men who
were paying him. My orders were to bring
in the hired tool that was arming the border
country. I did the best I could."

Kitty murmured, "And Dad still has his
Border Legion. Nothing has changed.
Everything's just like it used to be."

"No," said Ballard. "Nothing will ever
be the same. There's the house we aim to
build in Santone. We can't disappoint the
preacher that's coming here from Corpus
Christi."

In the blackness of the tunnel, her warm
lips were an inviting promise. To heck
with talking, Ballard thought to himself.
Marriage was full of things beside that.
And if what Kitty was offering him now
was a sample, the future looked mighty
promising.

THE END



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